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Beth Macy

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The Refugees of Roanoke

ROANOKE, Va. — ON Friday, David Bowers, the Democratic mayor of Roanoke, apologized for comments in which he called for halting the resettlement of Syrian refugees and suggested that our situation was similar to the one Franklin D. Roosevelt faced when he imprisoned Japanese-Americans.

The mayor didn't have much choice. After his remarks earlier this week, Hillary Clinton's campaign promptly kicked him off her Virginia leadership team. Area progressives are now praying that his bad press hasn't killed the city's attempt to persuade the Oregon-based Deschutes Brewery to choose Roanoke over our regional rival Asheville, N.C., for a planned expansion.

In the wake of Islamic State attacks in Paris, Beirut and elsewhere, I understand fears about terrorists making their way across porous borders. But refugees are not terrorists, and if anyone knows this, it should be the mayor of Roanoke. Having spent more than a dozen years chronicling Roanoke's immigrant communities, I'm here to tell the mayor: Learn more about the complexity of the people you represent, and not just for the sake of attracting a brewery.

Roanoke is a small city of around 100,000 people, but it has welcomed upward of 7,000 refugees over the past 40 years, beginning with refugees from Vietnam, and more recently from countries as diverse as Myanmar, Cuba, Burundi, Bosnia and Somalia.

In the winter of 2004, I watched Somali Bantu, part of a group of around 200 who would eventually settle here, deplane on the frosty airport tarmac, some in hijabs, some in bare feet. Stamped on their clothing were the letters U.S.R.P. — for the United States Refugee Program.

There had been a small backlash when our region's refugee resettlement office announced their arrival. A letter to The Roanoke Times predicted a plague of "increased welfare debts, crime, racial disharmony among residents." There were whispered fears about potential terrorists in our midst. More than a decade later, none of that has come to pass. Today, Roanoke's biggest festival is a celebration of diversity called Local Colors. Pearl Fu, the Chinese immigrant who spearheaded its creation, is known for greeting every foreign-born stranger she sees at the grocery store with, "Hi, where you from?" Roanoke is now a place where you can hear a dozen languages spoken at the bus stop at the end of my street.

You can also hear a lot of sad stories. Most of the Somalis spent years in camps awaiting U.S.R.P. approval. A Somali Bantu eighth grader I met in 2005 spent the first 12 years of his life in one of those camps, in Kenya. His mother was a widow; his father had been killed when the civil war came to his village in 1992. "Some day a soldier came and said, 'Give me your money,' and he did not have no money. So they killed him," he told me. Here in the United States, he got in a fight at school after an African-American teen chided him for being "too black." Because he spoke English, he did all his family's grocery shopping and was responsible for writing their rent and utility checks.

Khamisey Mohammed, one of several hundred Somali Bantu refugees who arrived in Roanoke in 2004. Credit Josh Meltzer/The Roanoke

I sipped a lot of warm orange Fanta — the refugee drink of choice — during the years I chronicled the city's multicultural growing pains and pleasures. I laughed at the image of the short, squat woman from Kosovo who, winded by Roanoke's steep hills, made her grown son push her around the city as she sat astride an old baby carriage with a cigar in her mouth.

I winced hearing about the Liberian refugee who had post-traumatic stress disorder after being forced to carry his wife's decapitated head through his village — or face having the rest of his family beheaded, too.

I spent 12 long hours one Saturday in 2006 documenting the wedding of a couple from long-warring factions in a Muslim ceremony held in a church topped by a landmark neon sign reading, "Jesus Saves."

"They would be killing about it back home," the sister of the bride told me. But the festivities went off without a hitch. (Alas, the couple divorced a few years later.)

These are people who passed rigorous background checks to get here. Many work multiple jobs. How else could they survive on the one-person, one-time grant of between $925 and $1,125 that the State Department provides to refugees, and pay back the $4,000 to $5,000 airfare bills most families arrive owing, not to mention send remittances to relatives back home?

In the years since these refugees arrived in Roanoke, I've had the pleasure of watching many of their children grow into standup citizens. One of the young people I interviewed, a Cuban named Soima, became a teller at my neighborhood bank branch. Faduma, a Somali teenager who sometimes translated for me, now works as a Department of Labor immigration analyst. A pair of Rwandan brothers created a successful translation start-up that our region's largest hospital now often employs. (Another brother landed in federal prison for a botched kidnapping attempt. His father was so ashamed, he could barely speak his name.)

By chance the last newspaper refugee story I wrote brought me full circle to some of the very same refugees I'd first chronicled in 2005. A professor asked me to write about a Virginia Tech collaboration between local food-minded people and some older Somali Bantu, former subsistence farmers who hadn't cultivated land since the Somali civil war.

When I arrived at a shared garden in the rural Catawba Valley outside Roanoke, they were tending the produce and learning about entrepreneurship.

Faduma, then a Tech student, translated for me as, one after another, the farmers described the transformative power of growing food. "You look around here, and it reminds you of home," said a middle-aged woman wearing a colorful dress, pajama bottoms, multiple scarves — including a hijab — and muddy Crocs.

I reached out to Faduma this week, after the mayor's remarks. "That was so reckless and disheartening, coming from my hometown," she said.

While Mr. Bowers was delivering his original statement, Faduma was volunteering at the Somali Embassy in Washington, reopening after 24 years. "We were celebrating that tribalism had become a thing of the past," she told me. She had been jubilantly texting pictures to her dad, a Roanoke school bus driver, when he called to talk about the mayor.

Be careful, he told his daughter. Don't do anything that's "too Muslim." Stay away from crowded events.

This, she said, was not the Roanoke she knew and loved.

Beth Macy is the author of “Factory Man: How One Furniture Maker Battled Offshoring, Stayed Local — and Helped Save an American Town.”

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