

https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/panelists-discuss-experience-locally-for-new-americans/article_15a795b5-f381-5ea8-b5f0-512de8fc23e3.html

Panelists discuss experience locally for new Americans

By DAVID MAMARIL HOROWITZ david.horowitz@bgdailynews.com
Sep 26, 2024

1 of 10



City of Bowling Green Financial Specialist Dmytro Kondratovych (right) speaks about Bowling Green's history of welcoming international residents as part of a panel, alongside April Memeh (center) of the Karenni Cultural Preservation Center, and International Center of Kentucky Executive Director Albert Mbanfu during a "New Americans, New Kentuckians" discussion Tuesday at the Kentucky Museum.

PHOTOS BY Grace Ramey MCDOWELL / grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

For residents born outside the U.S., the unique challenges presented in daily life make receiving a little compassion go a long way.

"Imagine you're coming to a new office, you got a new job, and there's people already there, they knew each other for a while, they're some sort of family and they're friends of each other – and, moreover, you have some sort of speech disorder," said Dmytro Kondratovych, a native of Ukraine and a financial specialist for the city of Bowling Green. "Those people are nice to you, smiling to you, saying, 'Hello, how are you?' to you. But those are basically your only interactions with them ...

"Try to be really sincerely nice and kind to them. Don't be scared to come and talk, to embrace them," he said to a group of listeners Wednesday at the Kentucky Museum on Western Kentucky University's campus.

Kondratovych was one of three panelists – the other two, Albert Mbanfu, executive director of the International Center of Kentucky, and April Memeh of the Karenni Cultural Preservation Center – who, along with moderator Leyda Becker, the international communities liaison for the City of Bowling Green, gave insights into the lives of new Americans in Bowling Green. Given the numerous pathways to U.S. residency, Becker used the term to refer to anyone born outside of the U.S. who now calls Bowling Green home.

Their accounts depicted a city where community members by and large have been supportive of new Americans.

“We live in a community that is so loving, so caring and so supportive,” Mbanfu said.

Between Oct. 1, 2023, through July 8, 246 refugees resettled in Bowling Green through the International Center, Mbanfu previously told the Daily News. In July, the local and state agencies responsible for refugee resettlement in Bowling Green recommended that the U.S. government allocate 318 spots for refugees to resettle citywide through the coming fiscal year.

Still, new Americans often experience a variety of unique difficulties and trauma.

Securing residency is frequently a lengthy, tedious process.

Becker recalled when her grandparents petitioned for her mother to become a permanent legal resident. Her mother, who years ago had earned a master’s degree in public health at WKU and could speak three languages, got stuck in an immigration loophole for nine years, Becker said.

Becker said this left her, as the daughter, in immigration limbo for years.

Another major challenge, Mbanfu said, is that many new Americans experience trauma because they’re unable to bring over relatives such as partners, children and parents.

“The process of bringing them over is as tedious as a camel passing through the eye of a needle,” he said.

Asked about challenges for new Americans in Bowling Green, Memeh pointed to people’s desire to find a sense of community. Kondratovych affirmed that loneliness is a significant challenge for new Americans.

“You cannot find your community, and you just feel lonely,” he said.

Memeh, who grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand, also emphasized how especially important education is for refugees. Mbanfu said the two school systems here, Warren County Public Schools and Bowling Green Independent Schools, “are doing a wonderful job educating our new Americans.”

Mbanfu added that while resettling refugees does take resources, it’s similar to a down payment with exponential payoff. He referenced the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ groundbreaking report on the topic earlier this year, which found that refugees and asylees brought a net positive fiscal impact of \$123.8 billion over a 15-year period.

While refugees have received a lot of support, Mbanfu said that year after year, he’s noticed less love and compassion than he used to.

“It is as if something has kind of penetrated our society to a point where people are beginning to be less nice,” he said.

Mbanfu emphasized the need for compassion, love and care.

Mbanfu recalled how a short interaction several years ago made him feel welcome. He was at an airport, and a stranger asked him, “Hey, sweetie, how are you doing?”

Mbanfu said it mesmerized him, as he came from a culture where people don’t approach strangers.

“At the same time, it touched me in a very profound way,” he said. “I think that was the first thing that made me feel like I was welcome in this country.”

— *David Horowitz reports for the Daily News via a partnership with Report for America.*

David Horowitz