

Spotlight on Diversity

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Conducted by Andrea Todaro, Diversity Director, BNHRA



Q: What is the premise of WEDI? Explain how it originated.

A: WEDI, the Westminster Economic Development Initiative, was formed by the Westminster Presbyterian Church in 2006 as a continuation of their work in the West Side community. They were working on Ferguson Avenue, developing housing with Habitat for Humanity, and the initiative was really founded to expand economic development opportunities in the community. Providing people with viable housing was a good place to start, but in order to truly transform the community, there needed to be employment opportunities, as well. WEDI operates several initiatives according to three core competencies: The first one is Education, where we operate two afterschool programs for the English language-learning population, the second is Economic Development, which involves our entrepreneurship programs and the management of our community development financing institution (CDFI), and the third is Community Development, which involves projects such as the West Side Bazaar.

Q: How have WEDI's initiatives been faring?

A: Very well! All of our initiatives have grown in capacity and how much we challenge ourselves. In terms of our education initiatives, we recently absorbed a program from Jericho Road that will effectively meet the needs of 7th and 8th graders. Our original program served first- through sixth-graders, and now we are expanding the number of individuals and children we serve from 30 to 64. In terms of our economic development programs, we were able to meet the requirements for three different sources of federal funding, as well as a certification. That allows us to access more capital for training, business creation, and lending. That's been really helpful because we are the first Small Business Administration microloan intermediary

headquartered in Buffalo. This in turn aids our community initiatives because we can direct funding towards business creation by refugees within the West Side Bazaar. Such community-based funding will encourage long-term financial sustainability that can eventually exist independently of federal or local government support. Through such conservative financing, we are anticipating the expansion of the West Side Bazaar within a year and a half.

Q: In terms of refugees and refugee initiatives, how many people have you put to work in the West Side Bazaar? How many vendors do you have and how has it grown?

A: We have hosted 48 businesses that have created about 56 jobs. The West Side Bazaar has been one vehicle to create employment opportunities and that's why we need to expand. The food side of things has a lot of potential, and for the refugee population in particular, it's a skill that people naturally bring, so we are looking at our expansion to include food production. Let's say that someone has a great original recipe for an ethnic dish. They currently sell it in small amounts and have to work long hours to produce enough to sell at market. For example, someone may say, "My 'injera' is the most amazing 'injera' around, and we can start packaging it and selling it at the market." There is potential for that, as well as food carts, food trucks, etc. Any area involving food production is a little easier for creating jobs and scaling. Food is a base need. Many of our retail outlets sell imported goods, so there are more opportunities for importing businesses than retail; however there is still a need for front end retail for certain foods. For example, accessing through Amazon to get a certain kind of Burmese cuisine may not yet be possible, but we are looking to the future where it may be more accessible.



Photos by: UB School of Management and The John R. Oishei Foundation

Q: Does the West Side Bazaar have an online presence? Do some of the vendors have websites or a collective presence where they are selling their goods online?

A: I don't believe any of them have done it well. There have been attempts, but even the e-commerce spaces are extremely competitive. And for our community, computer literacy often is a greater challenge, so managing and maintaining a website like that is more difficult. It presents a more difficult leap. When we find people who are able to do it, they do. However, at the Bazaar, we don't have very many people that are operating in that way.

Q: Are there any other critical or exciting changes that have occurred with the West Side Bazaar over the last couple years?

A: We've had some West Side Bazaar vendors "graduate" and start their own businesses outside of our organization. Graduating into the restaurant level is very difficult because you need to bring your customers with you. However, we should have our first true "West Side Bazaar

vendor graduate” move into an independent retail restaurant space. Previously, we’ve had our vendors “graduate” because they went into catering or they went into something a little bit less rigorous. But graduating into your own restaurant space represents a more significant risk... you’ve got to manage staff at that point, you’ve got to make sure that your tables are cleaned, things like that. It’s a big leap from running at the West Side Bazaar, which is why we want to expand the West Side Bazaar itself. I would say another advancement has been internally with our financial model for the Bazaar. Originally, our whole point was to graduate people from our location, we now have learned to roll back on that a little bit because if someone can run a viable



operating business in here, we call that a success. If they can pay the market rate and operate in that space, that is a success as well. So, our internal model has improved over that course of time where graduated rents go up every six months, rather than what we had originally done each year, and so that allows people to more quickly understand what the true cost of doing business is, so that they can be successful. That's a tough line to do, because we are mission-based, but we also need to be profitable. The lesson to our business

owners is that if you are not profitable, then you have to be subsidized and that won't last long; therefore you have to figure out how to generate the money to keep doing what you are doing. What we have done is be able to demonstrate that the refugee population is proactive and taking risks and working hard and developing our local small business environment. Over 50 percent of our clientele are refugees and we have just naturally seen the population stepping up to the table to take on owning a business. *Photo by The Buffalo News*

Q: How many refugees does WEDI serve?

A: Two hundred to three hundred is probably where we are at. When I mention the 50 percent, that's out of the data that we were able to collect on refugee status, and may not be representative of the full pipeline of 700 individuals. So, I would say at minimum 150 people, but I think that more accurately, it is 200 to 300. Do they all start businesses? No, but those are the populations that we serve. The 64 children in our after-school programs are all from refugee families.

Q: Have you helped to create a more robust, integrated, and collaborative community of refugees?

A: Yeah. I think that's one of the cool things that happened. We are a rag tag bunch of people; that is what WEDI is. We have surprisingly been able to facilitate that. Communities in many other cities are segregated based on ethnicity, often because of language issues. We have been able to foster a more collaborative environment.

Q: Can you summarize what diversity means to you in Buffalo, based on WEDI and your experience? Give me an idea of how you and your company define it. How do you feel about it?

A: If I defined diversity in one brief statement, it would be that *diversity is when voices are heard and truly heard*. Every single person, you can try and put them in boxes based on race, you can try and put them in boxes based on stereotypes, but the real fact of it is that each individual person is completely different, and the more we can accommodate individual needs

and individual voices and respond accordingly, I think that is vital. I mentioned the West Side Bazaar, I think the bazaar has naturally become a place where yes, we have eight different countries represented, twelve different languages spoken, but even in that space, you only have so many voices, and there's thousands more to be heard, so *how is diversity leveraging those voices to really empower society and have it move forward through understanding?* Our entrepreneurial programming flipped entrepreneurship on its side a little bit, because what we do is really, truly believe that *the person sitting across the table is the true expert*. Because when we assume that we are the expert, we're not going to allow that person sitting across the table to be entrepreneurial themselves and to challenge the status quo and leverage their own voice. There's a few different elements there, but I think it's really *seeing other people as being more informed than we are. They have a totally different narrative to share. They need to be challenged, and we need to be challenged.*

Q: Was WEDI in existence before you became a part of it?

A: WEDI was in existence before me. I have been with the organization for 5 years. What I like about WEDI is that it is not one charismatic individual's viewpoint; instead, it started as a group of individuals at Westminster. Some of the flavors of what I care about are definitely in this project. The first small bazaar consisted of contributions from a variety of people from all backgrounds and most importantly, the business owners and vendors who have really been able to foster their experience. As a person who has lived in different places throughout the world and seen how food courts operate in other places, I can bring that experience to this project.

Q: Have you had any partnerships recently with other organizations that have involved diversity and inclusion and helped to strengthen your team at WEDI? Which ones have been most significant over the last year or two, helping advance your mission?

A: We can't do it alone. I'm just one individual in what I mentioned was a rag-tag team. To really impact our society, it means collaborating with everyone, everywhere. This brings it back to the idea that there are other organizations and people who have significant value to bring to our



organization - we just need to find out how we can match and blend what we do. Local agencies and business partners often bring their own diversity plans, which help us successfully create and sustain ours. The collaborative list is very, very long and it's not just in name only, it's in actual action, so I can cite specific opportunities where we've worked together on a project and it has helped us with our operations. We only have so many resources for getting things we need done, so our partnerships help fill in those gaps. No one collaborator is more important than the rest, but for the sake of a good example, one group that I am a founding member of is the Microenterprise Collaborative. It's composed of many organizations such as the Small

Business Administration, the UBCEL, and several other entities who get together to discuss how we can work together to utilize our strengths and determine how others can lend diverse perspectives in terms of helping micro-enterprises start. We explore how we can help them expand and provide all the services and resources for them to do so. That's just one example on the economics side on how we have leveraged collaboration to engage those discussions and been able to see how we can better serve. To check out WEDI: <http://www.wedibuffalo.org/>