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CHARLOTTE'S ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPER

NEWS & OPINION **FEATURE**

A WELCOMING CITY IN ACTION

One Charlotte immigrant's story

BY LIZ ROTHBAUS BERTRAND

If you've ever moved to a new place, you know the experience can come with challenges: finding a place to live, landing a new job, setting up a new bank account, etc. But for many immigrants, the journey is even more complicated and the stakes can be much higher.

These are people who uproot their lives, often out of necessity, only to plunge into the unknown — a new country that may include significant cultural differences, language barriers, and a complex labyrinth of immigration policies and laws.

Sept. 9-18 is known nationally as "Welcoming Week," a moment to celebrate diversity and encourage communities to become more inclusive places for people of all backgrounds, including immigrants. The campaign came from the nonprofit organization Welcoming America, which earlier this year formally designated Charlotte as a certified Welcoming Place, the first Southern city to be deemed such.

But why does it matter to be welcoming? And who does it actually benefit?

As it turns out — all of us.

Consider the case of longtime Charlotte resident Martha Warkie, age 78. Warkie became an American citizen in the spring — 22 years after arriving in the United States.

When Warkie left her home in Monrovia, Liberia in 2000, she didn't expect it would be for good. She came to visit her sister, who had been living in Philadelphia for decades. But with ongoing civil war and political instability in Liberia, Warkie's sister urged her to extend her stay and apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

That special designation allows citizens of specific countries experiencing conditions that would make it dangerous to return — like armed conflict, environmental disasters or epidemics — to stay and work legally in the U.S. Currently, 15 countries are on that list, including Afghanistan, Ukraine and Syria.

TPS is not a path to green cards or citizenship, however, and each year the program's continuation depends upon the will of the current presidential administration.

When Warkie qualified for TPS, she ended up relocating to Charlotte, near her brother.

"It was too cold in Philly," she told me.

A widow who had never worked outside the home before, Warkie found a job as a nutrition aid at University Place Nursing and Rehabilitation Services in the University City area. She began in 2001 and has worked there for the last 21 years.

Warkie is part of the kitchen staff at the facility, which serves both long-term residents with specialized needs like Alzheimer's as well as those working toward recovery after an injury or surgical procedure.

"I like it because I get to take care of people, to help people," Warkie said. "You know when they need [it], you help them, so I just love it."

In an industry known for a high level of turnover, long-term employees like Warkie are rare.

"She's a very hard worker, very much a team player," said University Place administrator Coleen Anderson, who oversees staff at the facility.

The working conditions can be tough, she said, so it's sometimes difficult to fill positions.

"It's very hot in the kitchen in the summer ... and she stays over a lot [into second shift] when we need her to," said Anderson. "It's just challenging to find somebody who wants to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to come in to have breakfast ready at 7 ... I would just like to have about 20 more of her."

Warkie has built a life for herself here and remained a dedicated employee all these years, despite uncertainty about her own ability to stay in the country.

From 2001 to 2019, she went year to year with no guarantee that her status would be renewed.

While an expiration date for TPS is always posted — as it is for Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), another program requiring presidential

authorization that came into play for Warkie — the announcement as to whether it will be continued on any given year often happens at the last minute.

"You're just literally sitting there checking the website every single day to see when the president is going to renew it," said Jelena Giric-Held of International House, who has assisted Warkie with her situation since 2015. "That transitional period was always nerve-wracking."

Giric-Held serves as the Immigration Law Clinic Director at the nonprofit, which provides low-cost legal assistance to immigrants and refugees who are navigating immigration documentation

or naturalization. It's one of many programs International House offers to support the needs of foreign-rooted or foreign-minded people in Charlotte.

When Liberians suddenly became eligible to apply for a green card in 2019, Giric-Held jumped on the opportunity, and helped Warkie with that process. She ensured deadlines were met, the proper forms were filed, and even accompanied her to the qualifying interview.

Immediately after obtaining her green card, Warkie also was able to apply for citizenship. That's because the new law back-dated her residency to the day she originally entered the country, in 2000.



MARTHA WARKIE (LEFT) WITH JELENA GIRIC-HELD OF INTERNATIONAL HOUSE.
PHOTO BY MICA GADRIA

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"Thank you to Jelena who was there for me," Warkie said. "Today, I'm an American woman! I say, thank you for everything."

Becoming a more Welcoming city

Charlotte has been taking steps to improve systems and provide resources to help foreign-born residents like Warkie thrive.

Achieving a certified Welcoming Place status was part of a multi-year effort to assess and improve systems, as well as ensure their accessibility to everyone in the community, said Federico Rios, assistant director in Charlotte's Housing and Neighborhood Services Department. Rios also leads the office of Equity, Mobility and Immigrant Integration.

The effort really dates back to 2015, he said, when the Immigrant Integration Task Force Report was presented to Charlotte City Council. It led to the creation of his office in 2019 as a liaison between the immigrant community and the city. Rios said the certification included a rigorous examination of all city systems to ensure they are accessible to people, including those who speak different languages.

Rios said the certification recognizes the effort and progress that has been made but there's still much more to be done. It's not an end point, but a beginning, he emphasized.

It's essential work, he added, since an estimated 16-18% of the Charlotte population today is foreign-born, compared to 1980, when it was less than 1%.

When you expand that lens to include the children of immigrants, the numbers are even

more significant, Rios said, citing a 2016 report that showed one third of the youth population (18 or under) in Charlotte were either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants.

"There's this outsized proportion of our population that has [an] immigrant experience," Rios said.

They represent a significant percentage of the economic pie, too. According to a report published by the New American Economy in 2019, immigrant households in Charlotte earned \$4 billion and contributed more than \$1 billion in taxes in 2017.

Charlotte needs to do things that correlate with that significant growth, Rios said. And while some needs are unique to their situation, in many ways the foreign-rooted are looking for the same things as everyone else.

"They want babies. They want opportunities to create small businesses and be part of the workforce," he said. "They want to be able to access all the opportunities that a community renders to its residents."

Want to get involved? Here are a couple events taking place during Welcoming Week in Charlotte:

On Sept. 16, 6-9 p.m., International House hosts its annual Tapas & Testimonials fundraiser at the Mint Museum - Randolph, 2730 Randolph Road. The event includes internationally themed foods, music, auction items, and more. For details, visit ihclt.org.

Also on Sept. 16, 6 p.m., Rios will be a featured panelist at a talk organized by The Levine Museum of the New South. "What Is It Going To Take? Becoming A Welcoming City" will be presented at MacFly Fresh in Camp North End. You can find details and RSVP info at museumofthenewsouth.org/events/welcomingcity/.

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