

Lessons from a Decade in West Hill: Community Perspective from the Refugee Welcome Center

Tim Doherty and Matthew Klane

Abstract

This community perspective provides a brief history of the West Hill Refugee Welcome Center (RWC) in Albany, NY, a nonprofit organization that works to (1) assist with long-term refugee resettlement by providing affordable housing and vital services, and (2) address the systemic roots and contemporary repercussions of neighborhood blight. Tim Doherty and the RWC staff detail their various collaborations with local colleges and universities such as SUNY Albany, Russell Sage, and Siena. Faculty from the fields of social work, political science, nutrition, business, education, public health, and more have seen the RWC as a valuable site for student learning and cultural exchange. After highlighting the experiences of specific faculty, students, and refugee neighbors, Doherty and the RWC staff conclude by emphasizing both the inherent value and challenges of this collaborative, interdisciplinary, community-focused, academic work.

Over a decade ago—in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis—Refugee Welcome Corporation co-founder and CEO Tim Doherty returned home to Albany, New York. He bought, repaired, and moved into the house where his recently passed grandparents had lived, on upper Elk Street, in the underserved neighborhood of West Hill. Doherty had spent his previous years in Greece, China, and Tucson, Arizona, along the U.S.-Mexico border, working with immigrant advocacy groups. Upon his return to West Hill, from the beginning, his tenants and housemates were international college students, immigrants, and refugees. As more and more houses in the upper Elk area went vacant, and more and more refugees and immigrants arrived seeking housing, the idea of the West Hill Refugee Welcome Center (RWC) was born.

Five years in, with input and investment from some helpful benefactors—most especially Tucson-area doctor, activist, and educator, Kay Bauman—the Refugee Welcome Corporation resettlement and revitalization project was under way. We partnered with rental property owners such as the Albany Community Land Trust, and subsequently, other area rental property owners, to acquire and renovate numerous vacated and seriously dilapidated buildings (and also worked with the city to bring down several others beyond repair). We leased these buildings at low-income affordable rents to people who are refugees and immigrants. At the same time, we began subletting buildings in the area owned by absentees to help

care for their investments while growing our settlement project. Currently, we manage about two dozen units housing about 130 tenants, mostly single mother-led migrant families and individuals from Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, and countries across Latin America.

Early on, concurrent with our focus on housing, we also acquired a commercial building to serve as a community center, a place to provide English classes and youth programming. This burgeoning hub quickly appealed to a number of providers offering services and resources. The high pedestrian traffic sidewalk out front is a site for completing census surveys and distributing donated produce. The building's interior is used to organize Toys for Tots and vaccine clinics. In the warmer months, the side yard is a place for Albany Bike Rescue to repair bicycles and for rounding up kids for summer camp at nearby Swinburne Park. Moreover, several local colleges have come to see the RWC as an important community partner in their pedagogical missions.

Therefore, neither the refugee and immigrant population, nor this particular area of the city, are our *exclusive* concern. “One of the things that the center does,” explained Tim Doherty, “is bring in people who would normally have nothing to do with this neighborhood” (personal communication, November 8, 2022). Paraphrasing one of his mentors, Dr. Jerry H. Gill, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressor*, Doherty maintains that systemic transformation requires not only

raising awareness of the oppressed, but also raising the conscience and shifting the paradigm of the oppressor: Arm's-length, top-down approaches to either systemically displaced people or disinvested properties are destined to fail. They'll fail in motivation, sensitivity, and effectiveness. Worse, they'll fail to avoid deeper levels and effects of complicity, undermining best intentions and capacities for empathy. In this spirit, faculty from local colleges, notably SUNY Albany, Russell Sage, and Siena, have been working with the RWC (including as board members) as they seek analogous transformations in higher-education practices and theories.

Community Collaborations with Local Colleges

Dr. Wonhyung Lee is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Welfare at the State University of New York (SUNY) Albany. She has a background in social work and urban planning, and teaches and conducts research on where these two areas meet. Lee has been a board member at the RWC since 2020. She met Tim Doherty at a local church function, and upon learning of the RWC found the project aligned with her interests. Lee (personal communication, January 10, 2023) said:

I think of this word “neighborhood” a lot when I think of the RWC. It's a living example of what a neighborhood is, how it works, and how it changes. There's so much going on in one block. Everything is so vibrant, so real, so raw. And then everything has potential. I know it's tough on the forefront. At the same time, whenever we deal with potential, there's a lot of hope.

Doherty and Lee started brainstorming what they could do *together*. In her classes, Lee tries to bring students outside of the classroom into real-life community contexts. As a final project in her Macro Practice in Social Work I course, students are divided into small groups to do organizational planning and practice grant writing. To do so, they must try to answer this question: *If they were the RWC, what problem would they try to solve?* Then students research the theoretical and practical context, necessary resources, available funders, a realistic budget, possible challenges, and success-monitoring strategies. After developing their ideas, students present their research to the RWC. In the process, students participate in experiential learning and

Doherty receives real ideas (with built-in action plans) to consider.

In final evaluations, Lee has heard positively from students that this assignment has provided rich experiences, powerful memories, and made the curriculum “come alive.” For one particular example, a group of students considered the vacant lot (formerly a gas station) across the street from the RWC community center. The students studied similar “brownfield cases” and then thought about how the lot could be environmentally assessed, cleaned up (if needed), and repurposed for the neighborhood. The RWC now envisions that the vacant lot can be realistically turned into a community-gathering site that could potentially host a food truck showcasing cultural cuisine from the neighborhood. Lee has also worked with other local organizations to cultivate resources for neighbors who may be enthusiastic about this and/or other entrepreneurial opportunities. As an RWC board member, she advocates for hiring an entrepreneurial program coordinator to connect refugees to tangible support for business start-up planning and development.

Another board member, Dr. Ali Schaeffing, is a Professor of Geography and Director of Service Learning at Russell Sage College in Troy and Albany. In 2017, around the same time that Schaeffing arrived at Russell Sage College, separately, she met Tim Doherty. Schaeffing explained, “It probably was a year or two later when we were able to build some really meaningful projects with Russell Sage College and the RWC” (personal communication, February 20, 2023). The first project was with a nutrition class studying different food cultures in the Capital Region. Students went around to food outlets collecting data. They also volunteered as English-language partners with refugee adult women from Afghanistan, who were beginner-level English speakers, to have conversations about food and even cook together. “We non-Afghans in the room were awed by this really elaborate, gorgeous food preparation,” Schaeffing said. “It really shifted the power dynamic.”

In 2018, after solidifying the relationship between Russell Sage College and the RWC, Schaeffing began talking to Dr. Vera Eccarius-Kelly, Professor of International Relations in Political Science and Community Engagement Scholar-in-Residence at Siena College. Along with the Siena College Academic Community Engagement (ACE) office, and in partnership with the RWC, they recruited students to apply for an eight-week summer AmeriCorps project

that focused on supporting RWC initiatives and creating new ideas for programming. For three consecutive years (2020–2022), Schaeffing and Eccarius-Kelly acted as faculty advisors for variously sized student teams working with the RWC. At the end, they wrote an article about the experience called “Digital Storytelling and Visual Representations: Refugees Disrupt Stereotypical Narratives,” featuring the stories of refugee team members Balqees Sayed and Jeanne Sinzinkayo (and which was published in *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*).

In their article, Eccarius-Kelly and Schaeffing (2022) wrote, “As a multifaceted neighborhood project, resettled refugees guided and informed various ideas and action plans, so that the team could jointly produce surprisingly creative ways of centering individual refugees and their personal narratives.” Over the three years, they worked on various research and community projects: a refugee fashion series that worked on the development of ethical social-media policies for nonprofits; a participatory asset mapping of food, healthcare, and education; and a capstone event at the Opalka Gallery in Albany entitled, “We Are the Change: Refugee and Immigrant Community Day.” At this event, there were refugee art exhibits, informational booths related to services for refugees and immigrants, college access information, as well as demonstrations of refugee entrepreneurial ventures like food and needlework.

Meanwhile, during the academic calendar, beyond her work with AmeriCorps students, Eccarius-Kelly has also built relationships between the RWC and some of her Siena College classes. For example, in her Refugee and Migration Studies class, students have worked on interventions related to street signage, set up a medical clinic with the help of a physician from Albany Medical Center, overseen art projects, organized sports activities, and assisted with youth playgroups. There was even a group of students who taught a Wednesday night English language learners (ELL) class. Reflecting on her experience with the RWC, Eccarius-Kelly (personal communication, January 10, 2023) said:

One of the most important outcomes for me is that we now have two young people that we worked with over the years as first-year students at Siena and at Russell Sage. They’ve made it to college despite all of the obstacles. Having arrived in the

neighborhood only four years ago, they’re now college students. I think that’s an incredible success story.

In the fall of 2022, Farhad Nadir Ali began his studies at Siena College and Mary Minala began her studies at Russell Sage College.

How Engagement Positively Impacts Immigrant Communities

Mary Minala is Sudanese but was born in a refugee camp in Uganda. When, in 2012, at seven years old, her family was resettled in Albany, she didn’t speak any English. Since 2017, they’ve been living on Elk Street in the RWC neighborhood. Minala recalled, “Tim showed us the place and brought all of the neighbors together” (personal communication, February 1, 2023). Her favorite interaction with the RWC was an internship with nearby Tivoli Lake Preserve (coordinated by the RWC) where she learned about urban agriculture and helped on different community projects. One summer afternoon, Minala was introduced by Ali Schaeffing to some of the AmeriCorps students. Minala said, “I heard about Russell Sage, and it made me want to apply there.” So, now, after graduating from Albany High School, she’s enjoying her first year as a nursing major at Russell Sage College. Minala aspires to become a travel nurse and is currently taking classes in biology, nutrition, and even ballet. “It’s all new to me,” she said, “I never did ballet before!”

Nana Adoma Owusu-Ofori, the AmeriCorps student who guided Minala, joked “She didn’t really ask for advice. I just sort of gave it!” (personal communication, February 1, 2023). Owusu-Ofori, herself an immigrant from Ghana, graduated from Russell Sage College and now works with Schaeffing in the Russell Sage Service-Learning Department. On campus, Owusu-Ofori hosts an Intercultural Café, something she also piloted during her summer at the RWC. She explained, “The Intercultural Café is an affinity group, a shared space of learning and socialization for refugees, or any community members, who want to make friends and have conversation.” When asked specifically what she took from her experience at the RWC, she replied: “Emotional fulfillment. A sense of connection with other people. It’s nice to feel a part of something bigger than yourself.”

Within the space created by the RWC, there are so many learning opportunities and levels of cultural dialogue begging to be engaged. “In this whole thing,” Tim Doherty said, “watching

these families and these houses come together to create homes ... I mean, I have a Doctorate in Philosophy, you know, but this is it. This is what I've been studying" (personal communication, November 8, 2022). We recognize, of course, that it's not easy to develop programs where faculty and college students can both benefit and work effectively through experiential opportunities. There are complicated logistics to sort out, seasonally specific and set timeframes to negotiate, and deeply embedded philosophies to shift. These relationships require a lot of groundwork, a commitment to not overburdening already overburdened organizations, an attention to cultural differences, an awareness of the dangers of helicoptering into situations that you don't fully understand, and regular cognizance that learning is a collaboration. Nobody has all of the answers, but we can work toward being better listeners, sharing knowledge, solving problems, offering support, and learning from each other.

References

- Eccarius-Kelly, V., & Schaeffing, A. (2022). Digital storytelling and visual representations: Refugees disrupt stereotypical narratives. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*, 5(1), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.88>
- Gill, J.H. (2021). *Pedagogy of the oppressor: Experiential education on the US/Mexico border*. Resources Publications.
- Refugee Welcome Corporation (n.d.). West Hill Refugee Welcome Center. <https://www.rwcwesthill.com>

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Dr. Wonhyung Lee, Dr. Ali Schaeffing, Dr. Vera Eccarius-Kelly, Mary Minala, and Nana Adoma Owusu-Ofori for their contributions to this piece and to the overall well-being of the West Hill Refugee Welcome Center. Thank you, as well, to the many staff members, board members, interns, volunteers, and—of course—our neighbors who have, over the years, supported the RWC project.

About the Authors

Tim Doherty is the chief executive officer of the West Hill Refugee Welcome Center. Matthew Klane is the community co-coordinator of the West Hill Refugee Welcome Center.