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When Immigrants Teach Students

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When Immigrants Teach Students

Maine's thriving and vibrant immigrant communities have much to offer for Colby students.

Dipping into the Melting Pot

Colby students live and work in Portland's vibrant immigrant community

There's no need to leave Maine to study immigration, varied cultures, and the modern diaspora.

Six students did earlier this year, living and working with refugee families in the Portland area for the Jan Plan Study Abroad: Living and Working with Refugees and Immigrants in Portland. The Jan Plan, created and directed by Jeffrey Thaler, a Portland attorney, is a first for Colby and will be offered again in 2017. Portland, a refugee settlement city for over 35 years, has over 55 languages spoken by students in its schools, and residents from more than 80 countries. Earlier editions of the Jan Plan have garnered coverage from the state's major newspapers, including the [Portland Press Herald](#) and the [Bangor Daily News](#). The students and families involved in the Jan Plan told their stories to Milton Guillen '15, who shot and produced this video about their experience.



Building Relationships—Camera in Hand

Global Maine course introduces students and immigrants to each other and the moral obligation of representation



The project called for students to make documentaries a Maine, and it was about much more than pointing a camera.

Part of a two-course cluster, the ethnographic humanities lab Border Crossers and New Neighbors introduced students to the immigrant experience through readings and interaction with the Somali Bantu community in Maine. The lab also introduced immigrant partners to Colby students to help immigrants decide what stories they'd like to tell.

"We're hoping to really seed a generation of students that we know can work with on independent projects, on honors projects, and continue visual anthropology work," said Associate Professor of Global Studies Maple Rasza.

Rasza's own visual anthropology has taken him around the world making documentary films in the former Yugoslavia, among other locations. For this course, funded by several Colby centers and departments, he joined with Francis F. and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology Catherine Besteman, who has a longtime connection to the Somali Bantu community in Somalia and Maine.

"Catherine wouldn't dare send students out without any video training," Rasza said. "I wouldn't dare send them out to work with immigrant organizations without having the political and social context. So they're both backing the other."

The students collaborated with two Somali Bantu nonprofits in the city and documented the lives of community members, including Somali basket weavers, farmers, and video producers.

Charlie Gauvin '18, of New Gloucester, Maine, joined with Zoe Gibson '17 to explore the community with the help of Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services, an organization founded and run by and for members of the Somali community.

"Seeing it through the lens of MIRS gives a sense to the viewer that the people talking were part of a bigger narrative of change within the city," Gauvin said.



That lens focused on Somali residents of Lewiston in their homes, shops, and the local mosque. "It was a huge learning experience in terms of being able to throw yourself into a situation and rely on basic human connections to make it comfortable," Gauvin said.

He had never done filmmaking before the class, he said, and soon realized how challenging it was to build relationships—and to capture aspects of those relationships on video. "That was a big challenge," Gauvin said. "To not appear that you're just dropping in to get a story, and not appearing exploitative of this valuable relationship."

To do justice to their subjects, he said, "was a serious moral obligation."

Colby anthropologist Professor Catherine Besteman was reunited with Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston, Maine—decades after knowing them in their community in Somalia. [More about this "cosmic event."](#)