

network

HUMANITIES

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WHAT'S YOUR COMING TO CALIFORNIA STORY?

Photos courtesy of Holly Alonso, Robert Bengston, LGBT Historical Society, Joel Pickford, Candacy Taylor and Leslie Rios

New Council website — WeAreCA.org — chronicles the history of California immigration and migration; provides a platform for all Californians to tell their stories



Home page of WeAreCA.org.

Why did you or your family come to California? Was it for a better job, to follow a loved one, to escape from political oppression or upheaval in your native country, to make a new beginning or to follow a dream of a better life?

Since its beginnings, California has attracted millions of people from all over the globe — and from other regions domestically — who together have helped make this the most diverse state in the nation and one of the biggest economies in the

world. Now the Council introduces a new website, two years in the making, that traces the history of immigration and migration to California, presents the stories of individuals and groups who have settled here, provides educational materials for K-12 teachers and gives all Californians a place to tell their own or their families' immigration or migration stories. Intended for all Californians interested in the role that immigration and migration have played in the formation and

growth of the state, the site will be particularly useful to history and social science teachers and their students. WeAreCA.org is presented in both English and Spanish.

"The issue of immigration has surfaced repeatedly throughout the history of California and is now a heated topic of conversation again," said Ralph Lewin, the Council's executive director. "What this website does is give us a historical context for those

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FOUR COUNCIL STAFFERS TELL THEIR COMING TO CALIFORNIA STORIES

The Council's work on the WeAreCA.org immigration website prompted many staff members to explore their own experiences of coming to California. Like other Californians, we are a diverse lot, with just a few of us native born. The rest came here, often by circuitous routes, from other countries (Canada, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines

and Vietnam) or from other states (Illinois, Massachusetts and New York). An additional four staffers have at least one parent born in another country (Japan, India and Germany). Of our 14 staffers, only 5 are California natives.

Those of us who came from other places to settle here did so for a variety of reasons, from the lure of a new job opportunity to escaping

war or its aftermath, to following a loved one. When we considered our various stories and those of our parents and grandparents, we thought it would be interesting to share a few of them with our Network readers. Presented here are the stories of four of us: Deputy Director Alden Mudge, Grants Manager Lucy Nguyen, Senior Programs Manager Amy Rouillard and Operations Coordinator Carlos Torres. We hope that they will inspire you to visit WeAreCA.org and contribute your own story. We

want all Californians to be a part of the story of California.

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LET'S ALL WRITE CALIFORNIA'S HISTORY

By Ralph Lewin, Executive Director



AS WE LAUNCH our new immigration website — WeAreCA.org — I am reminded again of how profoundly California has been shaped by immigration.

Like 22 percent of Californians, I have an immigrant parent. My mother came to San Francisco from Germany on a visit in 1962, never dreaming she would meet and marry my father and raise a family in San Diego.

When I was growing up, I watched my mother struggle to find a sense of place for herself in her new country, and I became aware of the many ways that even in such a diverse state as California, immigrants have to face preconceived notions of who is Californian and who is not.

Another important person in my life when I was young was Jaime Escobedo. He and his family had moved to San Diego from Tijuana a few years before he and I were elected co-captains of our high school soccer team. Everyone respected Jaime, and he showed all of us how immigrants revitalize and strengthen the places where they live through friendship, leadership and hard work.

The stories of my mother and Jaime — and the millions of others who have come to this state — are distinctive, but they are all part of the history of California. They tell us what it means to be human, how people from different places wound up here and through sacrifice, diligence, determination and luck made California a better place and in doing so enriched our lives.

I am excited about the new website because it is filled with stories of people who moved here and made an impact on the state. Just as compelling about the site is that it's a place where all Californians can come and tell their own immigration stories, thereby enlarging the state's history.

Through a partnership with the California History–Social Science Project, a great professional development organization for K-12 teachers, we are conducting teacher workshops around the state, introducing the website and providing sample lessons. Teachers have responded enthusiastically and have told us that they see the website not only as a way to bring relevant content into the classroom, but also as a means to engage kids in talking to their parents and grandparents about their coming to California stories and then posting those stories. I believe that this experience will help young people understand the past and also see the role they can play in shaping the future.

The site doesn't say who is right and who is wrong in the ongoing immigration debate. Rather, it provides information about historical trends and events that people can use to make their own judgments. It is a way for all of us to become better citizens and contribute to the strengthening of our democracy.

We worked with top scholars across the state to develop the content for the site. They included Martin Meeker, Ines Casillas, Bill Deverell and Al Camarillo. My heartfelt thanks to them and all the others who lent their advice and counsel. Also thanks to members of the Council staff, who under the creative direction of Julie Levak, put a tremendous amount of effort into the project.

In the months ahead, we hope that you will visit our new site, learn more about the role immigration has played in shaping the state and enter your own or your family's story. And please spread the word to others about this important resource so that everyone's story becomes part of the great story of California.

Thank you all for your continued support.



SCHOLAR INTERVIEW STANFORD'S AL CAMARILLO

To mark the launch of WeAreCa.org, CCH Executive Director Ralph Lewin talked with Stanford University's Al Camarillo, a longtime professor of

American history and the Miriam and Peter Haas Centennial Professor in Public Service. Camarillo has published seven books and several dozen articles about the experiences of Mexican Americans and other racial and immigrant groups. His latest book — "Not White, Not Black: Mexicans and Racial/Ethnic Borderlands in American Cities" — will be published by Oxford University Press. The following is an excerpt from Lewin's interview.

RL: CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS YOU SEE AMONG CALIFORNIA'S DIFFERENT GROUPS?

AC: All the groups were motivated by a chance to make a new life for themselves. The image of California as a place to start over was passed on to generation after generation. There was the opportunity but also the struggle to make life livable. Black migrants from the South who came during and after World War II faced a new Jim Crow. Mexican immigrants like my own father experienced what I call Jaime Crow. They couldn't go to theaters or had to sit in the balcony. They couldn't go to barbershops or certain restaurants. Or they couldn't go to the public swimming pool until the day before it was cleaned. Those experiences give richness to a group's history. And they also explain how race and ethnicity were powerful factors in determining an individual's life course or a group's life course.

RL: AS WE LOOK AT THE LARGER TRENDS, HOW HAS CALIFORNIA BEEN SHAPED BY IMMIGRATION?

AC: One could argue that California's history has been more tied to a migrant experience than that of any other state. Europeans and mestizo people from other parts of the continent came to California by migrating north. To this day northern migration is fundamental to understanding California society. Then there's western migration. Americans migrated even before the Gold Rush, but the Gold Rush is the signal event. It created an international and national movement of hundreds of thousands of people that transformed the state. Asian migration began during the Gold Rush and continues to have a huge impact on the state's cultural and social makeup. The world has been coming to California for over a hundred and fifty years.

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TWO JOIN COUNCIL STAFF



The Council is pleased to announce that Vanessa Whang has been named the new director of programs and will assume her new position on October 20. Whang comes to the Council with more than 20 years of experience developing and implementing arts and culture programs on both the East and West Coasts.

Most recently, Whang worked as a consultant in arts philanthropy and cultural equity in New York City, where her clients included the Asia Society, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Among other accomplishments, she designed and implemented a \$3-million national pilot program — funded by the Ford Foundation — to support and examine diverse aesthetics and organizational practices in light of the nation's changing demographics; and designed and helped implement a \$35-million initiative to support contemporary music in New York state.

Previously, Whang served as director of Multidisciplinary Arts and Presenting at the National Endowment for the Arts. Other experience includes seven years as a member of the staff collective of La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, Calif.

A California native, Whang is a summa cum laude graduate of UC Berkeley, where she majored in English language studies. She also did graduate work in Berkeley's Ph.D. program in philosophy.



Jessica Sanchez joined the Council this past March as executive assistant to Executive Director Ralph Lewin. Before coming to the Council, she was an administrative assistant at the Public Policy Institute of California and a labor organizer for Unite Here, a hotel and restaurant union.

Sanchez received her B.A. in humanities from New College of California in May 2007. She is interested in labor issues and has been active in the immigrant rights movement in the San Francisco Bay Area for several years. Other interests include documentary filmmaking and learning how to use the media to engage people in social issues.

What's Your Coming to California Story? (continued from page 1)

conversations, so that we can more deeply understand the issues and ultimately make better decisions that will change things for the better. It also puts a human face on the immigrant/migrant population by focusing on personal stories.

“What makes the site really exciting is that it provides a platform for all Californians to tell their coming to California stories. This is not like other content-driven sites where the primary aim is entertainment. This site focuses on something people really care about — their own personal stories. And it's for everyone — families, kids, high school students and Californians everywhere. I particularly see it as a way to bring the generations together, with young people talking to parents and grandparents about how they came to California and then posting those stories. There's nothing else like this out there.”

Content developed by top scholars

The website divides California's immigration history into seven time periods. Each time period is presented in easy-to-understand prose along with photos, illustrations and maps, and is enlivened with the stories of the people and groups who have come here throughout California's history. Top history and immigration scholars developed the site's content.

Historian Martin Meeker at the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, was the lead scholar on the project. He said that a number of principles guided his work, including capturing the diversity of the immigration and migration experience. “Typically,” he said, “what we learn about California immigration in school is focused on San Francisco in the 19th century, particularly during the era of the Gold Rush, and Los Angeles in the 20th century. We wanted to show that immigrants and migrants settled all over California — San Diego, the Central Valley, the Inland Empire, the Imperial Valley and so forth.”

Also important, he said, was showing the diversity of the people who have come here. “Thus, we tell the story not only of the Dust Bowl migrants but also the stories, for instance, of Chileans who came here in the mid-18th century to pan for gold; filmmakers who started arriving in California in the early 20th century to become part of a burgeoning film industry; and Pakistanis, who began arriving in the 1990s to work in Silicon Valley's high tech industry. And the site doesn't focus solely on international migration. We talk about the people who for various economic, cultural and social reasons moved

to California from other states, presenting, for example, the stories of African Americans who migrated to California from the South in the 1940s for jobs in the defense industry; retirees who flocked to Southern California after World War II; and gays and lesbians, who moved to San Francisco in droves in the 1960s and 1970s and sparked a gay civil rights movement.”

Meeker continued, “We weren't able to include the stories of every single immigrant and migrant group, but the site is designed so that stories of other groups can be easily added. And, of course, the beauty of the site is that users can add their own perspectives, by contributing stories themselves.” Lewin concurred, “We don't see this as a fixed site, but something that is continually growing and changing.”

A resource for teachers and students

From the outset of the project, the Council viewed California's K-12 teachers — and their students — as important audiences for the site. To reach teachers, the Council formed a partnership with the California History–Social Science Project, a statewide project headquartered at the University of California, Davis, that provides professional development opportunities for history–social science teachers in California. “We wanted to get involved in the project because we saw the site as a valuable resource for both teachers and students,” said CHSSP's Executive Director Nancy McTygue. This past summer CHSSP held

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four workshops for K-12 teachers, presenting a model lesson aligned with state content standards that teachers could immediately use in their classrooms. (The workshops were held at Stanford University and University of California campuses in Irvine, Los Angeles and Davis.)

Jeff Pollard, a teacher at Natomas Charter School's Performing and Fine Arts Academy in Sacramento and a CHSSP advisory board member, developed the lesson plan and led the workshops, choosing as his topic the human toil of the Great Depression. “What I did was to present ways that teachers could use images and sound on the website to get students to see patterns, ask probing questions and think critically about the human experience of migration and immigration,” he said.



A California Story. Former CCH Board member Francisco Jiménez, professor of modern languages and literature at Santa Clara University, was born in Tiaquepaque, Mexico, in 1943 and grew up in a family of migrant workers. He spent much of his childhood moving around California with no permanent home or regular schooling. Jiménez writes about his childhood in the autobiographical novel “The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child.” He is seen here in the cotton fields of Corcoran with his older brother, Roberto, and his mother, Joaquina. Photo courtesy of Francisco Jiménez.

Pollard sees the website as a way for teachers to give a California focus to national events like the Great Depression. “Anytime teachers can make content more local, the students are more inspired. The closer you can come to home the better, and this is what this website allows you to do. What's great, too, is that it collects California history in one place, so that teachers don't have to sift through many different resources to find what they need.”

Pollard, who teaches 8th-grade social science and 11th-grade

“Students get introduced to California history in the 4th grade, and then there's nothing. This website will be a great resource.”

The Council and CHSSP plan more workshops this fall and winter. “We want as many teachers as possible to learn about the website and how they can use it in their classrooms,” Lewin said. Other teacher materials will also be developed to add to Pollard's materials and a separate 11th-grade curriculum developed by independent curriculum expert Jared Aldern.

American history, said that he is looking forward to using the website in his own classrooms. “It will also be useful to 4th-grade teachers, who are required to teach California history; to language arts teachers seeking to provide a historical context for Western stories and novels that their students might read; geography teachers seeking to enliven their material with human stories; and others.”

The reception to the workshops has been overwhelmingly positive. A 9th-grade teacher in San Jose was so enthusiastic about Pollard's presentation at Stanford that she decided on the spot to use the website as the basis for a unit she will teach this year on California social issues and problems. And an 11th-grade teacher in San Jose, also attending the presentation at Stanford, said that the website fills a yawning gap in California history materials.

Lewin also wants all Californians to contribute their coming to California stories. “I think it's particularly important for young people so that they see themselves as part of the history of California,” he said. Added Pollard, “The user-generated content feature brings a whole new level of student engagement to the classroom. Now after students learn about the experiences of California immigrants and migrants, they can write their own stories or the stories of people they know and upload them to the site. I think it will give them a sense of place that is very powerful.”

ALDEN MUDGE'S STORY

I was born in 1951 in a four-room hospital in a rural village of 950 people along the Susquehanna River in central New York state. My father's family, dairy farmers and feed and grain merchants, settled in the vicinity shortly after the American Revolution. My mother's family settled a generation or two later 14 miles away, over the river and through the woods, in the town of Deposit, which took its name from the fact that early loggers used the spot to float timber down the Delaware River to sawmills and paper mills.

My brothers and sister and cousins and I grew up feeling deeply connected to our village and its history. Like our great-grandfather, grandfather and fathers before us, we often spent summer afternoons hunting for arrowheads on plowed floodplains below town. We roamed the hills behind our house looking for the holes Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, dug in an unsuccessful search for the Golden Tablets of the Book of Mormon, before moving west to Palmyra, New York. Old farmers in the meat market and the doughnut shop told us stories of their grandfathers who fought in the Civil War. Our parents and grandparents were very well educated, very well read and very well traveled. They expected all of us to go out into the world. And to come back. My brothers and I grew up assuming we would enter the family business. California wasn't even a whisper of a possibility for me.



Alden's great grandfather's feed mill in Central New York state.

In my early teens my father died, altering my family's landscape. Shortly afterward, President Nixon's Russian grain deal and the government's buyout of small dairy herds altered the region's economic outlook. The small farms in the hills above the Susquehanna winked out. So did my family's feed and grain business, along with many other once-thriving businesses in the county. By the time we finished college, my brothers and I understood that we would need to find work in other places. I moved to western New York, then to Massachusetts and finally to New York City. There I learned and often repeated a joke that likened California to granola, which I thought pretty well summarized a place I had visited just once.

Then at my youngest brother's wedding in New Jersey I met a California native, a woman born and raised in Cupertino when its apple orchards were just beginning to give way to Apple computer. We liked each other. A lot, as it turned out. In March she came East to find work. She took one look at the brown snow and bare trees and returned to California. A few months later, to my utter amazement, I packed my bicycle and books into a blue Chevy Chevette and drove to San Francisco.

I cannot quite express how thoroughly displaced I felt at first in California. Where was the corner greasy spoon that opened at 5:30 a.m.? With all the forests in the Sierra, why stucco? Who were these Californians, so friendly on the surface yet so hard to get to know, the polar opposite of New Yorkers? Could my wife, the same woman I had followed to California, really believe that the dead, dry, treeless hills outside Palo Alto were "golden and beautiful"? Luckily I very soon found work that I enjoyed and that helped me experience California in profound ways, first at the Commonwealth Club of California and now at the Council. I slowly developed a thick network of friends. I found a group of cyclists with whom I rode happily into the Northern California landscape.

I cannot name the moment when I began to think of myself as a Californian. But years later, after my divorce, my family urged me to return to the East. Without a minute's hesitation I told them that leaving home was the farthest thing from my mind.

LUCY NGUYEN'S STORY

The story of how I came to California began 36 years ago on the other side of the world. I was born in Cam Ranh, Vietnam, in 1972 during the last years of the Vietnam War, the longest military conflict in U.S. history. Those years were tumultuous for my family. As a sailor in the South Vietnamese navy, my father was often deployed elsewhere in the country, leaving my mother with very little means to care for four small children. The communist raids forced us on several occasions to flee our home. My mother, my three siblings and I hid and slept under trees or any other shelter we could find.

When Saigon fell and the war ended in April 1975, chaos, panic and unrest broke out. Through sheer perseverance, determination and faith on the part of my parents, especially my mother, our family was able to board a South Vietnamese navy ship and escape in the immediate aftermath of the war with not much more than the clothes we were wearing. Despite the uncertainty of what lay ahead, my parents were determined to give their children a chance at a better life elsewhere. Unfortunately, we left behind grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who weren't so lucky.

Our journey was harried at times — my 3-month-old brother almost fell off the ship at one point and was continually ill. We were sent to refugee camps in the Philippines, Guam and eventually Camp Pendleton in Southern California, the principal resettlement center for Vietnamese refugees in the United States. There we waited for news about our future. After several months at the camp, we were sent in September 1975 to the island of Oahu in Hawaii, thus beginning our lives in America.

In Hawaii our family was sponsored by a Christian church whose members greatly helped our family — finding us a place to live, getting a job for my father, enrolling my older sisters in school and obtaining health care for us. Those early years were both exciting and challenging for my parents. They were in awe of everything around them and amazed by American ingenuity. But not being able to speak, read or write English was frustrating; they had to rely on others, including their children, who picked up the language quickly, to translate for them. It was also very difficult to raise five children — my parents had another child in 1977 — on meager wages. Our family had to depend heavily on government assistance. Through it all, my parents remained grateful that our family was living in America and that their children could do or become anything they wanted.

In my teen years, having grown up on an island in the middle of the Pacific, I had a strong desire to experience living elsewhere. I also had a real interest in American history, especially Colonial and Civil War history. So at 18, I left home and flew 5,000 miles away to attend college in Amherst, Massachusetts. Everything was new and different — the weather, the landscape, the architecture, the people — and I embraced it all. However, for the first time in my life, I felt different and understood what it meant to be in the minority. I graduated in 1994 with a degree in American history and a minor in sociology. Soon after, I attended graduate school at Boston College, again focusing my studies on American history, particularly the Civil War era.

While in graduate school, I met my husband, Chris, who was born and raised in New England, and took a part-time job in community relations at the Museum of Science in Boston. I liked my job and was impressed by the museum's outreach efforts to connect with community-based organizations and to create programs to attract children and families not traditionally served by the museum. It was this experience that set me on the path of working in the nonprofit sector.

Lured by the high-tech boom, the mild weather, the diversity of the people, the liberal politics and a desire for change, Chris and I decided to uproot ourselves and move to Northern California in September 2000. We soon realized that the California dream was not so easily attained. Unable to afford buying a house, we moved from one place to another. Finding and keeping a job proved to be difficult, and we both lost jobs at one point. We left behind a great network of friends in Boston and barely knew anyone in the Bay Area. Our first couple of years here seemed bleak, and I often found myself regretting our decision to move.



Lucy and her family in front of the Makiki Christian Church after Sunday mass in 1976. Members of the church helped her family adjust to life in America.

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Eventually, we were able to buy a house, find stable jobs and meet new friends. After eight years, I finally feel like a Californian and am happy to call the Bay Area home. Chris and I now live in Oakland with our 3-year-old daughter, Marissa. Friends and family back East always ask us when we're going to get that California "bug" out of our system and move back. Our response: "When it stops snowing."

AMY ROUILLARD'S STORY

I moved with my family from the small town of Streator, Illinois, to California when I was 6 years old. But this is really the remarkable story of my father, John Rouillard, and the series of events that drastically changed his life's work.

It was my father who made the decision to move our family of nine to San Diego in 1969. A strong believer in the value of higher education, my father put himself through college on the GI bill and received a master's degree in music from Northwestern University, where he met and married my mother. It was his dream that we all have an opportunity to attend college. Sending seven children to college on a high-school band teacher's salary was not going to be an easy feat. So when he was offered a job teaching band at Helix High School in San Diego, the deciding factor for him was the affordable college system in California and the opportunity the move would provide for his seven children to get a higher education.



Amy's Dad's class at the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1936.

My father had a keen interest in American Indian culture and people. He was a descendant of the Flandreau Santee Sioux tribe, and he spent his childhood on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. After moving to San Diego, my father discovered a large community of Native Americans living in this area. He was very interested in learning about the local tribes and often took our family to cultural gatherings. Over time my father became involved in that community and made close acquaintance with some of its leaders.

It was pure serendipity when in 1971, San Diego State University created an American Indian studies department, and several tribal leaders recommended my father as a strong candidate for department head. Thus my father's new career began. Self-taught, he had truly found his calling and became a pioneer in Indian education, working tirelessly on both national and local levels for the American Indian community until his death from leukemia in 1983. He was 54 years old.

I'm proud to say that because of my father's remarkable foresight, six of his children (including me) utilized the community college system and went on to get degrees at universities in California. And many American Indians benefited greatly from his innovative and incessant work on Indian education issues. He was a truly remarkable person, and I'm very proud to tell his story.

CARLOS TORRES' STORY

My story begins in El Salvador, where I was born in 1978. During my childhood, a civil war raged throughout the country and nearly destroyed it. We lived in a poor town close enough to the fighting that we sometimes feared for our lives, but not so close that we were threatened on a daily basis. One of my earliest childhood memories is having to duck down into the leg space of our family car as we sped through a line of fire as the FMLN guerillas fought the Salvadoran national troops on opposite sides of the road leading to our home. My dad tells a story about how he and other townsmen gathered rocks and the only two guns in our town when they heard rumors that the guerillas were coming and then chased the guerillas away from town when they arrived. Life was scary for me, but not as scary as it was for my brother and sister.

In 1980 everyone knew war was imminent. My dad's family in the U.S. wanted my parents to send my brother and sister to them illegally so that my brother would not be taken and forced to be a soldier or rebel and so that he and my sister could have a brighter future. My parents eventually gave in to my relatives' appeals and hired a coyote to bring my siblings across the border. As they were coming across, U.S. immigration officers caught them. The coyote was sent to jail and my brother and sister were taken to Mexico, where they were held in a jail cell. For two weeks no one knew what had happened to them. With me in tow, my parents searched frantically for them after learning from my relatives that the two had not arrived on the U.S. side of the border. When we finally found them, we went back home to El Salvador and spent seven more years there while the war raged on.

Our family was always comforted by music. My father, a music lover, started a youth group that went from town to town performing theatrical numbers. I always wanted to be a part of that group, and when I was 5, my father incorporated me into the shows. Music has been a big part of my life even though I've never had a formal music education, and I've loved the stage ever since my father gave me a chance to step onto it.

In 1987 my family emigrated to the United States. When we boarded the plane, I was under the impression that we were flying to Disneyland. I found out pretty quickly that that was a lie my parents told to get me to come quietly. It worked then. But I was never quiet after that.

In fact, one of the main ways I found a home in my new country was through performance. As soon as I could, I joined the middle-school marching band and later I performed at rallies in high school. My interest in music got more serious when, at 19, I was invited to be a part of a new youth salsa band called Kalichin, organized by a professional bass player named Manuel and the Mission Recreational Center to get San Francisco youths off the streets. For four years, I was the lead singer of Kalichin, performing all around the Bay Area. Manuel taught me a little about singing and stage presence, and through him I also got to see a bit of the business side of a band.



Carlos and his family in El Salvador in the early 80s.

Eventually six of us decided to leave Kalichin and start our own band, which we called Malafama, meaning "bad wrap" in Spanish. We dressed and looked like urban youths, and people were reluctant to hire us until they heard our music. With Malafama I had my first recording experience when we recorded a couple of songs at the multimillion-dollar studio donated by Carlos Santana to the Excelsior Clubhouse of the Boys & Girls Clubs of San Francisco.

Malafama was fun to be a part of, but I had other musical goals. After a couple of years I decided to create my own band. I was able to round up six musicians, but that wasn't enough to do what I wanted to do, so I decided to go solo. At about the same time, my family moved across the Bay to Richmond, where I reconnected with two of my cousins who had started a record label and released a group album. I got my second recording opportunity when they invited me to join them. I performed with them at festivals and other venues and recorded two songs. Through them I now had a connection with a local recording studio, Sack It Up Records, and recorded a solo mixtape track.

A few months later I stumbled into the most exciting musical step I have yet taken when I invited my Richmond neighbor Tony to be my DJ when I performed. Tony has been a DJ since he was 14 years old, and he loved the idea. He also had produced a beat and wanted to record the track with his cousin John. The two of them asked me for help organizing the song. I helped where I could, and when they heard me sing, they invited me to record the song with them. The three of us recorded the track through my connections with Sack It Up Records. We liked how we sounded together and on the spot formed the group JCT, which I currently lead. The name I go by is Charlie T.

With JCT I've taken our music to a higher level and to bigger venues. We've produced most of our own tracks and have always written our own lyrics. We've accomplished many things, and now we even have a manager to help us get more work and recognition. My passion for music, which started when I was a small boy in El Salvador, keeps me working toward becoming a popular and successful artist, with a record label of my own. And so, my California story continues.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: THE ETHIOPIANS OF LOS ANGELES

TWO-YEAR MULTIMEDIA PROJECT
CAPTURES THE IDENTITY STRUGGLES
OF ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S NEWEST
IMMIGRANT GROUPS



Insert left: Communion during Timket, the traditional Ethiopian Christmas celebration, Inglewood; Middle: Waiting for the processional on the steps of St. Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Compton; Top right: Attending services at St. Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Compton; Bottom right: A young Ethiopian shows off his tattoo of Africa with Ethiopia centered at his heart, Inglewood. Photos/Ara Oshagan.

Little Ethiopia in Los Angeles is not only a place for excellent ethnic food and specialty stores. It is also the hub of community life for the second largest Ethiopian immigrant population in the United States after Washington, D.C. The recent California Story Fund multimedia project provided a closer look at the struggles of this vibrant community and triggered a passionate, ongoing discussion within the community.

California is home to an estimated 100,000 Ethiopians, many of whom left their home country to escape political persecution, victimization and repression, especially after the Ethiopian revolution of 1974. Before the revolution few Ethiopians left Ethiopia to settle elsewhere. Today, continuing repression and food crises continue to drive people out, with a higher proportion of people emigrating than occurs in most other countries.

Religion and heritage

The Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, which investigates the role of religion in communities, became interested in Los Angeles' Ethiopian group because of the community's strong connection to religion. "Ethiopians have prospered in Southern California and managed to establish themselves well in a relatively short time. The project's goal was to hold up a mirror to the community to show the role of religion in preserving Ethiopian culture and how various issues were affecting people's lives," said Project Director Donald Miller, professor of religion at USC.

Rebecca Haile, an Ethiopian American lawyer and writer, who has lived in the United States since 1976, helped Miller conceptualize the project and make connections to the Ethiopian community. The project's photographer was Ara Oshagan, who for more than 10 years has been photographing survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide.

Miller said that they decided to center the project at a popular Ethiopian church, the Virgin Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and to gather stories from Ethiopians who went there.

"It took a while to get to know the people in the congregation, but gradually I was totally accepted, and they were happy to share their lives with me," said photographer Oshagan. Oshagan immersed himself in the community, attended religious and secular events, and took hundreds of photographs.

At the same time, Haile, a longtime friend of Oshagan's, conducted 13 in-depth digital audio interviews with congregants of different ages, genders, educational backgrounds and occupations.

"The priest and the board were very supportive in helping us identify a representative sample of people, and I was surprised how interested all the participants were in the issues I raised," said Haile, who is the author of "Held at a Distance," a memoir about her return to Ethiopia after 25 years in the United States. "The result was a powerful collection of stories and statements."

"When Rebecca and I sat down with my photographs and the material she had collected, we saw that they fit together perfectly and would make a rich multimedia presentation," Oshagan said.

It was natural to use the church as a focal point of the project, since Los Angeles doesn't have an official Ethiopian community center. Churches — at the heart of this scattered community — serve as an important substitute. "The church is like a meeting place, but it's also where our culture is," said one of the interviewees. It is here where second-generation Ethiopian Americans learn more about the traditions, language, family values and belief system of their forebears' country.

Although religion plays an important role in the life of most Ethiopians, the church is there not only for services. "Beyond religion it's a beautiful place to just come and see other people who you love, respect and care for," said another interviewee. At the same time, cautions Haile, "starting with the church means that we did not interview Ethiopians who are Muslim or who belong to churches other than the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. We recognize that this carries significant limitations."

A generational divide

The church is also a place where the differences between the generations are revealed. As a young member of the congregation stated, "Being a young Ethiopian of an immigrant family is like carrying a torch for our culture. We want to carry the culture on and at the same time we have to carry it on. It is very difficult in the beginning, very much a newness completely outside my family's realm of thinking. They had no clue. It's difficult to live up to their expectations. Even at church they stress that our generation has to get more involved in Ethiopian culture because we're next in line to keep it going in this country." Said a father in the congregation, "I try to transfer my knowledge and my pride in being an Ethiopian to my child. I don't know the outcome, but my hope is tied to my child."

It is no surprise that the community's struggle to preserve its culture and to define its new identity causes intergenerational tensions. "It's hard to raise a kid here if you're from another country. The freedoms that we have and that we're expected to give our kids in the United States are very different," said one mother.

While parents are mostly concerned about putting food on the table, younger people have to bridge the gap between the two cultures and come to terms with their dual identities in secular, hyperurban Los Angeles. "I incorporate parts of both cultures, but sometimes it feels like the one or the other," said one young woman congregant.

Defining identity becomes a quest for many young people. "You have to know what America is about



“Being a young Ethiopian of an immigrant family is like carrying a torch for our culture. We want to carry the culture on and at the same time we have to carry it on.”

and how to succeed here, but in that process you can't lose who you are and where you come from. It's definitely a struggle for balance,” another young congregation member said.

Local involvement

Apart from these identity struggles and intergenerational conflicts, Ethiopian Americans take pride in their heritage and stay involved. As the most obvious sign of this strong involvement, Los Angeles is the only city in the United States with a neighborhood named for an African country. “Little Ethiopia was a recognition that there is this huge community here that should be recognized and celebrated, and it took a lot of civic work in order to get to that point,” said a congregant. The name now stands as a lasting testament to the contribution of this community to the city of Los Angeles.

The involvement has yet another dimension, since the majority of first-generation Ethiopian community members living in Los Angeles left their homeland for political reasons. “Ethiopians in the United States are a confident community with a strong premium on education, but they are often highly politicized and feel an obligation to follow the turbulent political affairs in Ethiopia and to watch developments closely,” said Miller.

“Political events there impact the community here immediately,” Oshagan said. “The shooting of students in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, in 2005 led many in the Ethiopian-American community into the streets, in front of the federal building and newspaper offices, to bring attention to what was happening.”

Oshagan pointed out that Ethiopian’s intense interest in events back home has its downside. “The more people are worried about things over there, the less time and

resources they are going to put into building a community center and putting down roots here. At the same time, a direct connection with home is seen as a necessity for keeping the younger generation in touch with their cultural background and traditions.”

No going back

Haile and Oshagan presented their work to the community at a restaurant in Little Ethiopia this past March. Included in their multimedia presentation were Oshagan’s colorful still photographs, traditional and contemporary music, and sound bites from Haile’s personal interviews. “This was the first time we added multimedia components to our work at the center,” said Miller.

The event received huge interest and twice the expected attendance. Besides the multimedia work, the event featured a panel discussion led by Haile covering such topics as generational conflicts, conservative viewpoints of the church, the role of women in the community, and political history and involvement. “A lively discussion ensued with the audience, and there was a lot of passion,” said Oshagan. The discussion revealed that now, more than 30 years after the first wave of immigration, the majority of the community is slowly coming to terms with the fact that there is no going back. Said Haile, “It was obvious that people are ready to have that conversation.”

This story was researched and written by Council intern Frank Zopp, a 2008 graduate of Freie Universität in Berlin, Germany. Zopp worked for the Council for eight weeks this past summer as part of a fellowship program of the Humanity in Action Foundation, an international organization that gives American and European students an opportunity to learn about human rights work through education programs and internships.

New photography exhibit focuses on L.A.’s Ethiopian and Armenian communities

“Identity and Community,” a new exhibit of photographs by Ara Oshagan, is an intimate look at two immigrant communities that Oshagan has photographed extensively: Ethiopian and Armenian. The exhibit will be on display at the Center for Experimental Art and Architecture in Los Angeles until the end of October. 3191 Casitas Avenue, Suite 138. For information, visit www.ceaasite.com. To find out more about Oshagan’s work, go to www.araoshagan.com.

Camarillo Interview (continued from page 2)

RL: HOW HAVE ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION CHANGED OVER TIME?

AC: We can go back a hundred and fifty years and see that certain groups were not accepted but were needed. We would not have had the construction of the intercontinental railroad or mining as it matured in the Sierra foothills or a number of other industries without Chinese labor, yet they were a hated population because of racial attitudes. At the beginning of the twentieth century Mexican immigrants played a key role in developing the infrastructure of California’s economy, and yet they were also a maligned population. There’s a long history of almost a love-hate relationship. We need them, they’re important to our economy, but when their numbers increase, we want to keep them out or send them back. That’s a history woven into the fabric of California’s past — and present because we’re still dealing with it.

RL: WHAT SHOULD CALIFORNIANS PAY ATTENTION TO AS WE GO INTO THE FUTURE?

AC: One of the remarkable things about our past is that there’s been resistance to groups’ coming in, but there’s also been acceptance. When you look at the incorporation of different groups into California society, you can say to yourself, we have a diverse society. Yes, there are some problems, but look at how all these different groups have been able to come into the mainstream. They may have been excluded at one point, but now they’re second, third, fourth generation and they’re important to the economic, cultural and social life of California. In a way we’re a model for not only for the rest of the United States but maybe the world. In a sense we’re a laboratory to see if this amazing diversity of human beings can actually forge a positive, constructive society in the twenty-first century.

RL: HOW WOULD YOU SAY WE’RE DOING?

AC: It’s a mixed bag. There are stories of enormous success where people took opportunity and transformed their lives. And then there are stories that remind us of California’s educational gap, which is extreme. That is one of our huge challenges.

RL: HOW DO YOU SEE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS BENEFITING FROM USING THE NEW WEBSITE.

AC: Through the interactive part of the website Californians can tell their stories, and that’s what history is made of — stories. Too often people feel that their voices are not heard, and this is a way to incorporate them. It gives students the opportunity to learn amazing things about immigration history that aren’t necessarily in textbooks. I’m going to get my students involved.

RL: HOW IMPORTANT IS THE KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY TO OUR DEMOCRACY?

AC: Unfortunately, too many young people are being educated in a disconnected way from the past, and the past is critical for our understanding of who we are as individuals, as a people, as a nation. Telling your personal family history or your individual tale of migration can open up a world that you couldn’t have imagined otherwise. It can help you understand how your life is connected to something larger. I would argue that this website, which is a mechanism for creating connections, should eventually be part of the California state curriculum.

RL: THIS SUMMER WE INTRODUCED WeAreCA.org TO TEACHERS AT FOUR WORKSHOPS ACROSS THE STATE. I THINK PART OF THE REASON THE TEACHERS WERE SO ENTHUSIASTIC WAS THAT CALIFORNIA CLASSROOMS ARE FILLED WITH STUDENTS WHO ARE EITHER IMMIGRANTS OR CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS. THOSE TEACHERS SEE THE WEBSITE AS A WAY TO SHOW STUDENTS THEIR CONNECTION TO THE CALIFORNIA STORY. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO MAKE THOSE CONNECTIONS?

AC: Teachers have a tough job. It’s difficult for them to do something outside the mandated curriculum. The website makes it easy. They can assign students to read what is already posted and/or to contribute. Building lesson plans around the website will be easy too. My son, who’s a seventh- and eighth-grade U.S. history teacher in Compton, is really interested. Over half of his students are either Mexican immigrants or children of immigrants, and this will be a way for them to see the larger history they fit into.

RL: IS THERE ANYTHING YOU’D LIKE TO ADD?

AC: I’m eager to see the postings, which I hope will relate a newer history of California. There is no important text that tells the immigration story of the last thirty years. This website could be an important vehicle for telling that story.

Who We Are

The mission of the California Council for the Humanities is to foster understanding between people and encourage their engagement in community life through the public use of the humanities.

The Council is an independent, not-for-profit state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities supported through a public-private partnership that includes funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, private foundations and corporations. The Council also receives essential support from individuals.

To learn more about the Council and how you can participate in its programs, please visit us online at www.californiastories.org.

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