



Set in the heart of America's Bible Belt, **Welcome to Shelbyville** focuses on a small Southern town as they grapple with rapid demographic change and issues of immigrant integration. The film captures the complexity of the African American, Latino, white, and Somali subjects as their lives intertwine against the backdrop of a crumbling economy and the election of a new president.



FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

The movement of people from one place to another, the ways that we acclimate to other cultures, and the resulting fusion of humanity has always fascinated me. During my master's work in foreign relations at Johns Hopkins, I was most interested in social change as it played out in the personal realm, rather than national or historic narratives. *Welcome to Shelbyville* evolved out of my deep desire to tell stories that would not only raise awareness about complex social problems, but also highlight the people and communities tackling these problems with innovative solutions that might ignite social change.

Welcome to Shelbyville chronicles a year in the life of a town in the rural South grappling with the challenges of rapid demographic change. With focus on Shelbyville as a microcosm of current-day trends in immigration bringing an increasing number of newcomers to rural locales, I intended to provide a snapshot of this phenomenon through the voices of ordinary citizens, both U.S. and foreign-born, who are often navigating these challenges without much precedent or guidance.

Luci and Miguel, two of the film's subjects (who would never self identify as activists), are plain speaking folks who become local ambassadors to various residents around these issues. Through their work with an initiative called Welcoming Tennessee, they provide a portrait of what a successful and authentic grassroots movement can look like. Together, they seed the ground for others to become involved and form the basis for narratives that counter the more negative stories mainstream media has tended to highlight.

Embarking on this journey on the eve of the 2008 Presidential election undoubtedly had a great impact on how the story unfolded – both for me and for the subjects of the film. I initially set out to tell a story of immigration in rural America, but as I found myself in a part of the country that had seen hard struggles in the civil rights movement, it felt necessary to look back at that history of integration and how it intersected with the current newcomers who were no longer of European ethnicity (for example, a wave of Latino immigrants in the 1990s was followed by the arrival of hundreds of Somali refugees of Muslim faith). What I felt most compelled to capture was, in a sense, the layered anatomy of integration in this one town. To local African Americans like Beverly Hewitt and Marilyn Massengale, people whose families had lived in Shelbyville for generations, the election of the first African American president seemed to represent a potential to become a greater part of a national conversation that they had felt excluded from. How that had bearing on their own immediate lives, with many strangers now attempting to settle in their town gave them a choice: to repeat cycles that often excluded the next group of newcomers or to make connections with their own outsider pasts, mobilize, and break those cycles.

An early survey of local perceptions toward immigrants that I was privy to spelled out a major disconnect between the attitudes toward immigrants of the past and the immigrants of today. I spent a lot of time with families like the Gonzalez family; as Miguel and his wife Guadalupe patriotically stood in their living room, hand over their hearts as the national anthem played during the Presidential inauguration, I was reminded of my own Russian grandfather and his passionate desire to become a valued citizen in the country he fought hard to settle in.

My own perspective, as I shuttled back and forth over the course of a year between New York City and Shelbyville, Tennessee, was simply that integration is not easy for anyone, and that a more nuanced national dialogue about immigration needed to be taking place; perhaps taking cues from folks like the ones in Shelbyville with less of an eye on political correctness and with no particular political agenda other than that of living more harmoniously with their neighbors. With screenings that have spanned the globe from Abuja, Nigeria to Harlem, New York it is my hope that *Welcome to Shelbyville* can continue to spark constructive dialogue around issues of xenophobia, racism and migration that I believe to be one of the most critical global conversations in the world today.

– Kim A. Snyder, Director/Producer of *Welcome to Shelbyville*



Photo credit: Courtesy of K.A. Snyder Productions

THE FILM

Shelbyville is a small southern town in central Tennessee, sometimes regarded as the “buckle” of the Bible belt. Deeply religious and steeped in traditions such as the annual Tennessee Walking Horse show and high school band competitions, the town maintained strict color lines through the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1990s, a large influx of immigrants began to arrive, upsetting the town’s homogeneity. More immigrants arrived after the turn of the current century, forcing Shelbyville to confront its insular culture and its prejudices. *Welcome to Shelbyville* is an examination of the adjustments that this small town, like many others in the United States, has had to make to the demographic changes brought about by recent immigration.

Although Shelbyville has largely put its segregationist past behind it, each wave of newcomers has stirred some of those old feelings and readjusted the pecking order of groups within the town. The 2008 election of Barack Obama threw a whole new light on race relations and raised serious questions for some about their long-held values and attitudes. Against the backdrop of these major social and political shifts, the film focuses on the Somali refugees who are Shelbyville’s newest residents. Unlike the earlier Hispanic immigrants – and the town’s longtime African American residents – the new arrivals are Muslim rather than Christian. In the wake of 9/11, their presence has stirred up fears and anti-Muslim bigotry, feelings that are compounded by residual prejudices against people of color among many in Shelbyville. Some of the antipathy toward the Somalis is due to concerns about jobs, which they are accused of taking from Shelbyville’s other residents. Most of the Somalis work at Tyson Foods, a major employer in the area, and trouble in recent times over the company’s hiring of undocumented immigrants has left lingering resentments and feeds the perception that the Somalis are being given special treatment.

A series of articles by reporter Brian Mosely in Shelbyville’s *Times-Gazette* has provided factual information about refugee resettlement in the U.S., but has also described the Somalis in unflattering terms. Unable to gain access to anyone in the Somali community, Mosely based his reports on anecdotal information from various people in town. Although the articles were meant to help Shelbyville get to know the Somalis in Bedford County, the effort aroused feelings that spill out in passionate and hate-filled responses sent to the paper.

With the help and encouragement of Miss Luci, and the support of a welcoming committee of Shelbyville residents, a group of the Somalis meet with Brian Mosely to express their displeasure with the articles, and he pledges to write something more positive. Other gatherings soon follow, including a “Community Unity” meeting to bring together the people of Shelbyville, and a women’s party where whites, blacks and Hispanics get to know one another as they enjoy an elaborate Somali meal.

Miguel Gonzalez, one of the leaders of Shelbyville’s welcoming committee, represents an earlier wave of immigrants who came from Mexico several decades ago to find work in the U.S. As he remembers his own experience as an immigrant – leaving his family,

finding work in a new country, the discrimination he faced – he expresses gratitude for the opportunities he has found in the U.S. and empathizes with Shelbyville’s newcomers. The Gonzalez family’s pride in their American citizenship is evident: in Miguel’s voting for the first time, in their emotions while watching the inauguration of the new president, and in their visit to the monuments of Washington, D.C.

A montage of recent developments at the end of the film shows the bridges that are being built between the older, established residents of Shelbyville and the Somalis. Words of two of Shelbyville’s leaders sum up the community’s hopes: from Ed Gray, Bedford County School Superintendent, “We’ll assimilate, we’ll adjust”, and from Miguel Gonzalez, “It’s just a matter of time.”



Photo credit: Greg Poschman

SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN WELCOME TO SHELBYVILLE

Miss Luci – Teacher, ESL and U.S. Civics
 Brian Mosely – Reporter, *Shelbyville Times-Gazette*
 Albert Stephenson – Former mayor of Shelbyville
 Hawo Siyad – Worker, Tyson Foods
 Miss Beverly – Caterer, First Baptist Church
 Miguel Gonzalez – Auto worker, General Motors
 Marilyn – Sunday school teacher, Scott United Methodist Church
 Stephen Craine – Pastor of First Presbyterian Church
 Mohammed Ali – Imam, Shelbyville Mosque
 Eugene Ray – Mayor, Bedford County
 Ed Gray – Superintendent, Bedford County School District

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Who is a refugee?

Unlike immigrants, who choose to leave their home country in search of a better life elsewhere, refugees are people who are fleeing dangerous and untenable circumstances in order to survive. The Refugee Act of 1980 established U.S. refugee policy, with the following priorities for people in urgent need of protection:

1. Safe, voluntary return of refugees to their homelands
2. Other long-term solutions, such as resettlement in countries of asylum within the region and in other regions, if returning to the home country is not possible
3. Resettlement in other countries, including the United States, if either of the options above are not possible

To be considered for admission to the United States as refugees, persons must be able to establish persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Somali refugees

According to the United Nations, Somalia produces the third highest number of refugees in the world, after Afghanistan and Iraq. Somalia is considered a failed state, with no functioning government, plagued by ongoing violence between rival warlords and Islamist militias, economic collapse, disease, and famine. Created in 1960 by the combination of two former colonies, one British and one Italian, Somalia has experienced a great amount of turmoil since becoming an independent country. Border disputes with its neighbors Kenya and Ethiopia in the mid-1960s, and a military coup in 1969 led by Muhammed Siad Barre set the stage for further political instability. A severe drought caused widespread starvation in the 1970s. Policies of the Barre regime during the 1980s created clan conflict that resulted in his ousting in 1991 and a civil war that marked the complete breakdown of governmental authority in the country. War, anarchy, and continued drought have forced millions of Somalis to seek respite and shelter elsewhere. Hundreds of thousands have fled to refugee camps in Kenya, Uganda, and to other nearby countries, and there are over one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Somalia. Many of those in Kenya and Uganda are awaiting resettlement in other countries, including the U.S.

QUICK FACTS

- In 2010 alone over 68,000 refugees fled the fighting and conflict in Somalia.
- The Somali Bantu are a minority ethnic group in Somalia who were forced from their lands during the Somali Civil War in 1991. They were given priority status for resettlement in the U.S. and by 2007 approximately 13,000 had been resettled in communities throughout the country.
- The world's largest refugee camp, located in Dadaab in northeast Kenya, shelters approximately 300,000 refugees. According to a November 2010 report, Somali refugees were streaming into the camp at the rate of about 6,000 per month.

Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/4c11f0be9.html>

Refugee resettlement

The U.S. has long been a haven for those fleeing war and persecution. According to a 2007 report by the Migration Policy Institute, "Of the 10 countries that carry out resettlement programs, the United States accepts more than double the number of refugees accepted by the other nine countries combined, resettling approximately 2.5 million people since 1975."

Refugees comprise about 10 percent of annual immigration to the United States. For the most part, they are resettled in metropolitan areas where they may have relatives and where their country or ethnic group is already represented in the population. In recent years, there has been a shift toward resettling refugees in smaller cities and towns in order to avoid placing too large a burden on specific localities or agencies.

There are eleven nongovernmental national resettlement agencies* that serve refugees admitted through the U.S. Resettlement Program administered by the U.S. Department of State. Refugees are identified abroad by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), U.S. embassies, or qualified nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and approved by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Once a refugee's admission is approved, it is designated to one of the eleven resettlement agencies in the U.S., which works with the State Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and various private agencies to receive and resettle refugees in their new communities.

* http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/partners/voluntary_agencies.htm
 This site contains a list of 11 voluntary agencies that contract with the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration to resettle refugees.



QUICK FACTS

- The following countries have resettlement programs: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Other countries accept individual refugees on an ad hoc basis.
- UNHCR refers only about 1 percent of all refugees for resettlement to a third country, after all efforts to either help refugees return home or settle permanently in the country of asylum have failed.
- As of 2004, Somalia ranked eighth among the countries sending refugees to the U.S.

Source: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=585>

Shelbyville and the Somali Refugees: The *Times-Gazette* Articles

In December 2007, Brian Mosely, reporter for the *Shelbyville Times-Gazette*, began a series of articles at the request of a local official to inform readers about the Somali refugees living in the community. A selection of those articles listed next provides a flavor of some of the content, and fills in much of the information that *Welcome to Shelbyville* was not able to incorporate.

OPINION: Where do we go from here?

... I set out to write the series in hopes of educating the public about our latest arrivals. This proved to be extremely difficult due to the fact the refugees had ignored our repeated inquiries. Despite this handicap, I was able to learn a great deal about the Somalis – what they had escaped from, how they came here, the various cultural and religious differences and the challenges they faced in our country. –02/02/08

Somali refugees find a haven in Shelbyville

...some of the Somali refugee arrivals to the area are direct resettlement clients, while others may be “secondary migrants” who were originally resettled in other states and/or other parts of Tennessee. –12/22/07

Local services adapt to serve Somalis

Bedford County schools already educate some 900 Hispanics, so the system was already prepared to deal with students speaking a different language. [Bedford County School Superintendent Ed] Gray also said that the school system has “very definitely” had some culture clashes with the Somalis since they have moved to Bedford County.... “Out of 11 principals, five of them are female, and we also have assistant principals that are female. Their lack of respect for women cause” the Somalis’ difficulties with women in supervisory roles. –12/24/07

Cultural differences hinder understanding

... despite the educational efforts, a vast chasm of differences remains between the refugees and the communities they have moved to, mainly in the areas of religion and culture. [The article describes these

differences, including the Muslims’ requirement to pray at specified times of the day and potential problems that may cause for some employers; Somalis’ different communication styles; their habit of haggling over prices; the Muslim prohibition against men and women touching each other in social situations.] – 12/26/07

Tyson jobs led Somalis to Shelbyville

“Refugees are expected to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, so early employment is a must,” Regina Surber, director of community services in Tennessee for the Department of Human Services (DHS) said. “Resettlement agencies focus the majority of their initial and long-term services on finding employment.” According to Gary Mickelson, director of media relations for Tyson Foods, out of the 1,100 Team Members Tyson employs in Bedford County, just over one-quarter of them are Somali. “They have heard about employment opportunities at Tyson primarily through word-of-mouth,” he said. ... the company requires all newly hired workers to complete a post-offer health assessment. –12/27/07

Source: <http://www.t-g.com/topic/somalia> contains a list of Brian Mosely’s stories about Somali refugees

Assimilation vs. Multiculturalism

Melting pot, mosaic, tossed salad – these are a few of the metaphors used to describe the mixing of different ethnic groups within a given country. Historically, the United States has represented the melting pot model, in which cultures and ethnicities blend to become one people with a shared set of values and a common language, often expressed as *e pluribus unum*. Assimilation is the key word here, with the expectation that newcomers will assume the customs of the area where they settle, learn English, and leave their old culture behind. In the past 25 to 30 years a new term entered the discussion of our national persona: multiculturalism. More the mosaic approach, multiculturalism believes in preserving the cultural identity of different groups, along with their languages and other cultural characteristics. Multiculturalism values all cultures and recognizes ethnic diversity as a strength. One sign of multiculturalism in the U.S. is the heritage months observed throughout the year: Hispanic Heritage month (September), Native American Heritage month (November); Asian-Pacific Heritage month (May), and so on.



Photo credit: Greg Poschman

TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO *WELCOME TO SHELBYVILLE*

A screening of *Welcome to Shelbyville* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. You may consider framing the discussion from the lens of immigrant integration, emphasizing the multiplicity of experiences that result from demographic shift. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- U.S. immigration policy
- Refugee resettlement
- Changing U.S. demographics
- Culture clash
- ESL education
- Immigration law
- Social services to immigrants
- Politics of immigration

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Why do people dislike some changes but welcome others? What types of changes are seen as disruptive and why? What kinds of change do people generally like? Why is an influx of immigrants or refugees often regarded as an unwelcome change?
2. When Pastor Caine preaches about the 2008 election results being a wake-up call, what does he mean? He also says the election results are “troubling for many reasons.” Why would he say that?
3. Like many other Americans, Miss Beverly and her relatives and friends were very emotional watching the 2008 presidential election returns, as were Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez when they watched the inauguration of President Obama. What do you think accounts for these emotional responses?
4. How does the election of Barack Obama provide context for the rapid demographic changes in Shelbyville?
5. Why did Brian Mosely’s articles provoke such strong reactions among Shelbyville’s residents? Do you think that if he had included information directly from the Somalis themselves the reaction would have been different? Why or why not?
6. What is your impression of the way the church ministers are approaching the issue of dealing with the Somalis and the whole issue of change in Shelbyville? Do you think they will be able to “reach” the Somalis, as the Baptist group shown meeting in the film hopes? Why or why not?
7. What differences do you notice in the way various residents talk about Shelbyville’s immigrants, for example, the African Americans compared to the white residents, or Miguel Gonzalez (a leader in his church) compared to the church ministers? What reasons can you give to explain these differences?
8. When refugees are resettled, or there is an influx of immigrants to a particular area, what is the best way to prepare both sides – the newcomers and the current residents – to accept and understand one another? Whose responsibility is it to see that this happens?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Consider starting a “Welcoming” initiative in your state, based on the Welcoming Tennessee initiative mentioned in *Welcome to Shelbyville*. If an initiative already exists, find out how you can become involved. Get more information at the Welcoming America website: <http://www.welcomingamerica.org/tag/tennessee/>.
2. Stay informed about Somalia. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees provides statistical information and news stories at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483ad6.html>, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs contains up-to-the minute news stories at <http://www.irinnews.org/country.aspx?Country=SO>
3. Are there refugees or recent immigrants living in your area? Make an effort to find out who they are and how they can be integrated into the larger community. Work through places of worship or social service agencies to organize an event, such as a potluck dinner, where various groups can meet one another.
4. Volunteer to help a refugee family. You might offer to serve as a host family, language tutor, life skills trainer, pro bono attorney, or fundraiser. Check with organizations or agencies in your community that serve refugees and immigrants to learn what opportunities are available. You can also get information at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/partners/voluntary_agencies.htm.
5. Some people feel that new immigrants should become assimilated as quickly as possible, while others believe it’s important to preserve an immigrant group’s culture. Organize a community discussion of, or debate about, the value and benefits of these two approaches. Comprehensive information on this issue can be found at this website, which is a project of the International Debate Education Association: http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate:_Multiculturalism_vs._assimilation.



6. Create a “diversity report,” featuring information such as the following, about new and older immigrant groups in your community: descriptions of the countries of origin, personal stories of individual immigrants or refugees; holidays, crafts and foods of the various groups; ESL classes they attend; preparation for the citizenship ceremony. Ask a local newspaper or community newsletter to carry the report as a regular feature.
7. Share your story on the Shelbyville Multimedia website. This site, which hosts various resources on how to continue Shelbyville’s example in your hometown, collects stories about those who welcomed immigrants to this country and helped to change their lives. Go to <http://www.shelbyvillemultimedia.org> for more information.

For additional outreach ideas, visit <http://www.communitycinema.org>. For local information, check your PBS station’s website.

RESOURCES

<http://www.becausefoundation.org/films/TheFilm.php?ID=1> – BeCause Foundation drives social change through the powerful fusion of documentary filmmaking and related strategic programs.

<http://www.shelbyvillemultimedia.org/about/> – Shelbyville Multimedia is a platform for promoting community building and harmony between native-born Americans, immigrants, and refugees nationwide.

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/welcome-to-shelbyville/> – The *Independent Lens* companion website for *Welcome to Shelbyville*.

Information about Somalia

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/so.html> – This CIA website contains basic factual information about Somalia.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1072592.stm – This BBC website contains a wide range of current and historical information about Somalia.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somalia> – This Wikipedia site contains detailed information on the history, politics, and culture of Somalia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somali_Bantu - This website describes the Bantu, the ethnic group that comprises the majority of Somali refugees in the U.S.

Refugee assistance and resettlement

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/partners/voluntary_agencies.htm – The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement lists voluntary organizations and agencies that help resettle refugees in this country.

<http://www.state.gov/g/prm/rls/147254.htm> – U.S. State Department fact sheet from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration describes the refugee screening and resettlement process.

<http://www.refugees.org> – The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian charitable agency that provides tools and opportunities for building self-sufficiency of refugees and immigrants nationwide, fighting refugee warehousing around the world, and protecting the rights of migrating children.

<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/> – Refugees International conducts 20 to 25 field missions each year to identify displaced people’s needs for basic services such as food, water, health care, housing, access to education, and protection from harm. Based on this information, the organization advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises.

General immigration Issues

http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/07_immigration_geography_singer.aspx – “The New Geography of United States Immigration” is a brief paper from the Brookings Institution that describes the demographic changes taking place because of new immigration.

http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate:_Multiculturalism_vs._assimilation – A project of the International Debate Education Association (IDEA), Debatepedia is an encyclopedia of pro and con arguments and quotes, utilizing the same wiki technology powering Wikipedia to engage the public in providing arguments and quotes.



Photo credit: Greg Poschman



Photo credit: Greg Poschman

WELCOME TO SHELBYVILLE WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN MAY 2011. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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COMMUNITY CINEMA is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. COMMUNITY CINEMA works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more, visit <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema/>.

