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Varied Voices

Whittier nonprofit gives immigrants a platform to tell their stories

By Zac Farber

Tea Rozman Clark stands in front of a class of fourth graders at Lake Harriet Upper School and tells them that her native country of Slovenia is shaped like poultry.

"You know Italy, where the boot is?" she asks. "Well, behind the boot is the sea and behind the sea is the chicken."

Clark, a Linden Hills resident whose two daughters are enrolled at Lake Harriet, is the founder of Green Card Voices, a Whittier-based nonprofit that has recorded the stories of more than 420 immigrants and refugees from 120 countries — packaging their narratives into book anthologies, web videos and, as of October, a podcast.

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▲ Tea Rozman Clark, founder of the nonprofit Green Card Voices, speaks Nov. 21 to a class of Lake Harriet Upper School fourth graders studying immigration. Photo by Zac Farber

Bag law aims to reduce litter

City will soon require retailers to charge a nickel per bag

By Andrew Hazzard

When Guse Green Grocer in Lynnhurst ran out of plastic bags last month, owner Terry Thomson didn't place another order.

The local grocer at the corner of 46th & Bryant knows its customers aren't fans of extra plastic. The store offers paper bags for customers who don't bring their own, but as of January, Minneapolis will require Guse and other retailers in the city to charge 5 cents for each bag they distribute to customers.

The goal of the new ordinance, passed unanimously by the City Council in November, is to reduce litter and waste. About 87,000 tons of plastic bags are thrown away each year in Minneapolis, according to Patrick Hanlon, director of environmental programs for the city's health department, and less than 5% of plastic bags are recycled. Plastic bags also tend to get caught in recycling sorting machines, delaying the recycling process. While plastic bags have greater long-term effects, paper bags are harsher on the environment in their production stage.

"This fee is really adding a cost to the use of bags," Hanlon said.

The ordinance requires retail stores to charge a nickel for every bag — paper, plastic

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For sale: 'cursed' restaurant site in Uptown

By Michelle Bruch

The owner of the former Piggy Bank Eatery & Music Hall property says he's giving up on restaurants at 2841 Hennepin Ave., and expects to quickly sell the site for redevelopment.

Stuart Chazin, who owns the property as part of 2841 Hennepin LLC, said the site may be under contract in the coming days, likely for new apartments. Piggy Bank closed in November, and Chazin said he's received multiple offers in recent weeks. He said he wanted to wait five to ten years before selling but restaurants are not making enough money in Uptown.

"I kept getting offers, but I kept refusing them, because I didn't want to sell it," he said. "I don't know what would have worked, seriously. ... Live music possibly would have worked there."

The closely watched site held five different restaurants in five years following Old Chicago's long run. Chazin's group acquired the site for \$2 million in 2010, and Old Chicago's departure in 2013 was "their call, not mine," he said.

Chazin said Kaskaid, the restaurant group behind Crave and Union Rooftop, held a long-term lease, and the company either partnered on restaurant concepts or subleased the space

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A sample of restaurants that attempted a run at 2841 Hennepin Ave., clockwise from top left: Samantha Fox and Meshika Shadows at Game Sports Bar in 2016, Yoom Nguyen pictured in 2017 at the original Lotus Restaurant in Loring Park, BoneYard chef Jason Bush in 2014, and Lorenzo Ariza in 2015 at Salsa a la Salsa. Photos by Michelle Bruch

“Teachers say one of the main problems they’re facing is that a lot of their curriculum is still about Ellis Island and a historic perspective on immigration as opposed to authentic stories of their new neighbors,” Clark said.

Green Card Voices often sends groups of three immigrants from different continents into classrooms in an effort to represent the “breadth and diversity of the immigrant population.”

But on Nov. 21, Clark came to Anthea Bibuka’s social studies class alone. Her daughter Sofia, 9, is one of Bibuka’s students, and the class was wrapping up a five-week immigration unit.

“Who migrates?” Clark asked the class.

“Monarch butterflies,” a student replied.

“Different people around the world,” said another.

“Whales.” “Birds.” “People in poverty.” “Dolphins.”

“Dolphins I didn’t know, but now I do,” Clark said. “It is something innate in all living creatures — that they move.”

Clark was 15 years old when war broke out in the former Yugoslavia. She told the Lake Harriet students how her sister’s 4-month-old puppy was permanently traumatized by the sound of air raid sirens. Though the violence that devastated the region lasted only 10 days in Slovenia, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled north from Kosovo, and Clark started spending more of her time volunteering in refugee camps than she did in school. “It was really sad,” she told the students.

In her early 20s, Clark came to the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire on a scholarship, did postgraduate work at New York University and later returned to Slovenia for a Ph.D. program specializing in oral history. At the University of Nova Gorica, she interviewed 15 survivors of the Bosnian genocide and 15 soldiers in a Dutch peacekeeping force that failed to prevent it. “That process really informed me of the power of storytelling, both in terms of healing and also in terms of self-advocacy and empowerment,” she said.

In 2012, Clark and her Wisconsin-born husband, Nathan, decided to move back to the United States. “We couldn’t get good jobs, and health care was not great and things just weren’t working out,” she told her daughter’s schoolmates.

Two-year-old Sofia spoke no English and had to move far from her Croatian grandparents, but Clark let her pack a single box full of toys to be mailed to the U.S. “When the box arrived many months later, she had forgotten what she packed,” Clark said. “She was like, ‘Uh, I’m too old for this.’”

Guided life narratives

The year after she arrived in the Twin Cities, Clark started Green Card Voices at a desk she rented in the Intermedia Arts building. Her desire was to give every American immigrant a platform to tell the full story of their actual experience — free from assumptions and stereotypes. In the Twin Cities, where most of



Green Card Voices program director Julie Vang (right) and marketing intern Maddy Olson stand inside Whittier’s FLOCK coworking space, where the nonprofit is based. Photo by Zac Farber

the nonprofit’s storytellers live, more than 1 in 10 residents are first-generation immigrants.

“In order to truly understand what the stories of immigrants in America are, you should be telling as close to the 46 million stories as possible,” she said. “Every single immigrant has their unique story and it’s really important to be mindful and pay attention ... so we can all be good neighbors and be a good community together.”

As Green Card Voices storytellers work to compile what Clark calls “a guided life narrative,” they are given six open-ended prompts, such as, “Take me back to that moment when you first found out you were coming to America.”

They’re then given a month to journal about their lives, to ask family members questions, to read other immigrants’ stories and to jot down bulleted notes. “Usually, it’s a very intentional, introspective time for our storytellers,” Clark said.

At the end of the month, Clark sets them up in front of a video camera, repeats the six prompts and records their answers for posterity. Afterward, they work collaboratively on the transcript with copy editors to create a final text they feel reads true.

“Sometimes it’s their first time sharing their stories, especially in this political climate,” said Julie Vang, Green Card Voices’ program manager. “[Immigrants] are not here to take what is here — they’re also giving back as well. We want to reframe the rhetoric around immigrants and refugees.”

In February, Green Card Voices’ small staff — two full-timers, two AmeriCorps volunteers and a rotating cast of interns based, since early this year, in the FLOCK coworking space near Eat Street — will publish the nonprofit’s seventh anthology of immigrant stories, this time focused on Minnesota residents in the science, technology, engineering and math fields. Their first book, released in 2016, shared the stories of 29 student authors attending Wellstone International High School in Powderhorn Park.

The stories told through Green Card Voices vibrate with humor, pathos, alienation, gratitude and joy — recounting moments traumatic, empowering and digressively personal.

Fadumo Yusuf, now an engineer and poet, explains how on her journey from Ethiopia to New York she only knew a few English words, like “water” and “time,” and was confused why flight attendants kept grinning at her. “Why are they smiling?” she remembers thinking. “I didn’t say a joke or anything.”

Nachito Herrera, a world-renowned Cuban pianist who lives in White Bear Lake, shares how he needed to make the decision “to become a double image.” “You can’t get rid of why you left Cuba; that is not possible,” he writes. “At the same time, it’s a completely new life you’re living here.”

Zaynab Abdi, who fled bombing and revolution in Yemen and Egypt, decides, after a difficult first few months in America, that she loves the free lunches and the homework help and throws herself into her schoolwork. She’s now preparing for a career as a human rights attorney at St. Catherine University and has testified to the United Nations about the Yemen refugee crisis three times in the past three years.

In a book dedicated to telling the stories of Minnesota entrepreneurs, Bryn Mawr resident Tomme Beevas jokes about how his 14-month-old daughter is the first person in his family to wear a snowsuit and explains his decision to keep the Jamaican cuisine at his Whittier restaurant Pimento “authentic yet flexible” by serving boneless jerk chicken “even though you’d never find a boneless chicken running around Jamaica.”

Beevas said he is proud to have sold two

cases of Green Card Voices books at Pimento (they’re also available at Birchbark, Magers & Quinn and Wild Rumpus) and he’s been impressed with how the nonprofit’s staff have “walked their mission” in terms of hiring immigrants to publish their books and cater their events.

He said by participating in the Green Card Voices process, he was able to “dive deeper than I’ve ever dived to understand my immigrant story.” “Often times as immigrants we tend to decentralize immigration issues,” he said. “Like, ‘Oh, it’s just Latin Americans, it’s just Somalis.’ It gave me a chance to hold space as a Jamaican immigrant.”

Spaghetti and accents

Once Clark is finished presenting to the Lake Harriet fourth graders, she takes questions.

Asked to say something in Slovenian, she shares that her favorite food is spaghetti bolognese and her favorite hobby is kite flying on Lake Harriet.

After she translates her answer into English, the students chime in: “Oh, I heard spaghetti,” “I heard Lake Harriet.”

When a student asks if she has an accent, she replies that she was recently in Atlanta, working on a Green Card Voices book, and the locals told her she has two accents: a Slavic accent and a Minnesota accent.

Clark tells the students that the most common language in the world is “English with an accent.”

“The next time you hear someone speaking English with a Slavic accent, with a Spanish accent, with a Somali accent — that’s what the majority of people speak,” she says.

Leaving the Lake Harriet classroom, Clark is invigorated.

“Children, especially at this age, are so eager to learn and their imagination is also pretty incredible,” she says. “They are, in many ways, so much more accepting of diversity than those who have grown up.”



Tomme Beevas

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Green Card Voices’ anthologies are designed to give every American immigrant a platform to tell the full story of their actual experience.



Bo Thao-Urabe
Luang Prabang, Laos
Eagan

“My father left my mother alone with us — four small children aged 4, 3, 2 and less than a year — as he went on fighting [against the Laotian communists]. After several months, my mother sensed that

it was no longer safe to stay in our village, so she took us into the jungle to hide and wait for my father’s return. There we hid for several months. No longer able to farm, my mother would hide us under banana leaves each night after we fell asleep, then go off to find food.”



Zaynab Abdi
Aden, Yemen
St. Paul

“When any immigrant person comes to the United States or to Europe or to any country, it doesn’t mean they hate their country or that they just want to try a new country. Maybe they didn’t find a chance

to complete their education, or maybe there were problems and war. So when they move to another place, another state, another country, they need that safety and they need their future. One day every immigrant will go back to their country and build it because they belong to their country.”



Caterina Cerano
Calabria, Italy
Minneapolis

“I have two beautiful children, now adults, and a very nice-looking grandson. My children help me a lot. I’m happy. ... I love and respect America. I never regret coming here, even though I left my whole

family back in Italy. Back in 1986, we had an American military base where we lived. My heart leaped when I saw American soldiers! Seeing them, seeing the American flag, I would feel at home. I feel more at home here than in Italy.”