

OPINION

Commentary: Immigrants are human beings, not faceless masses

When we listen to their individual stories, we might learn something — and it might help us tone down the rhetoric.

By Jackie Lieske and Sarah Gordon

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Provided by the Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History.

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“Rising flood.” “Waves of migrants.” “No welcome mat.”

The story of immigration to the United States is long and complex, but there's one consistent theme: New immigrants are perceived to be a threat, and in turn, are politicized.

At the Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History in Kingston, we are seeing this as asylum seekers arrive in the Hudson Valley and regional authorities take defensive positions. Rockland, Orange and Dutchess counties have sued the state for injunctions against more arrivals. The founder of a nonpro t foundation paid homeless men to tell a state Assemblymember that they were displaced by migrants, a story broadcast on national media until proven false by local journalists. A U.S. representative has introduced a bill to prevent New York from housing migrants in SUNY dormitories.

As a museum and cultural center, the Reher Center's mission is to foster belonging by engaging people through culture, community and work. This perspective leads us to view immigration as a unifying human experience. We see immigrants as central to the vibrancy, diversity and socio-economic well-being of our region.

Our current exhibition invites visitors to look at the faces and listen to the voices of 36 neighbors as they describe their experiences of making lives in the Hudson Valley. Hailing from 22 countries, these individuals — immigrants themselves or the children and grandchildren of immigrants – discussed the many reasons they came to the United States, how they worked, studied, raised families, started businesses and formed communities.

One woman told us about becoming a citizen as a child and telling the judge she was there “to be free.” A second storyteller was forced to flee his country, where he had faced execution because of a book he wrote; in the United States he studied theology and coached soccer. A third works as a hospice aid and says she has “a lot of love to share.” A fourth, a young man who wants to study, sends his earnings to his family. He told us that thanks to his contributions, “they don’t suffer as much.”

Listening to the voices of the storytellers — their joys, tastes, tears, and laughter — shows us what is unique to each person and what is held in common about being an immigrant to the Hudson Valley. This humanizing approach demonstrates the power of individual stories in the face of anti-immigrant rhetoric that suggests faceless, threatening masses.

The Hudson Valley benefits when we welcome new arrivals. The asylum seekers currently housed in shelters and motels have their own stories and the potential to contribute in countless ways to our culture and community. Maybe they are escaping violence, natural disasters, political persecution, crushing poverty. Maybe they hope to support their families and make a better life.

Hearing our neighbors' stories gives us the opportunity to understand real people rather than numbers, to empathize with their experiences, and to appreciate how individuals create a life and shape a community. Let's listen to recent migrants and recognize their ability to strengthen, not threaten, our community.

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