



Refugee & Immigrant Fund



Program Report, 2014



The Refugee & Immigrant Fund (RIF) is dedicated to assisting refugees and immigrants in New York on their journey to legal and social integration in the U.S.

The Refugee & Immigrant Fund is...

Maria Blacque-Belair
Founder & Executive Director

Julian Sanjivan
Director of Communications and Strategic Planning

Ellie Alter
Program Facilitator

Greg Jones
Program Facilitator

Manuel Gomez
Program, Communications, & Development Consultant

Cristian Panaite
Research Development Coordinator

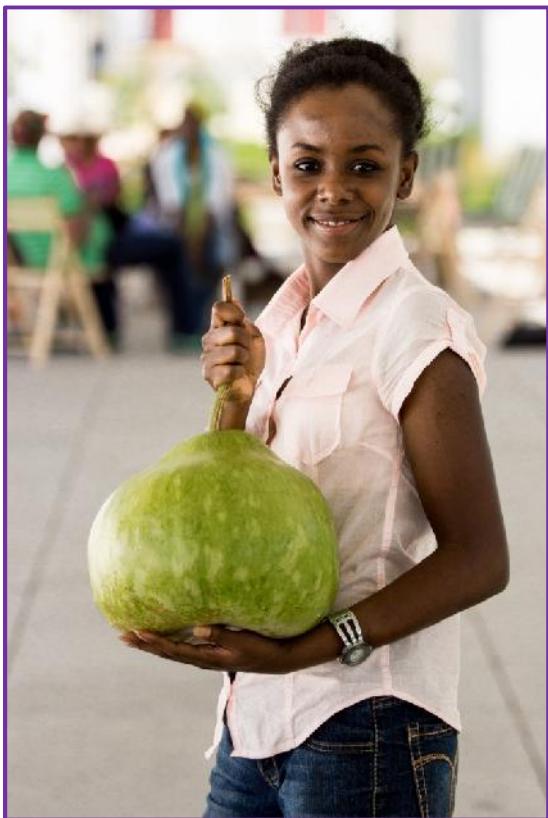
Chris Barrett
Communications & Blog

Anne Saint-Pierre
Photographer/Roots

Koray Ersin
Photographer/Photo Gallery

...And many more generous volunteers!

Dear Friend,



Sometimes looking at the state of the world, one can feel so helpless. From Ebola to Syria, there are so many reasons to despair. But at RIF, we are privileged to witness the transformation and renewal of victims of violence, torture and gender persecution. It is a privilege because we know **WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE**. A big thank you to our supporters for giving us that chance, and to the inspiring individuals we serve, who by their courage and resilience renew our hope in humanity every day.

2014 marked the fourth year of the Urban Farm Recovery Project, our flagship urban agriculture training program for refugees and immigrants rebuilding their lives in the United States. Many of our participants arrive in New York seeking asylum, overwhelmed and completely alone. If they're not alone, they're struggling to raise children in an unfamiliar city. Many are still reeling from the psychological effects of the violence, persecution, or torture they escaped from. The Urban Farm Recovery Project gives them a place to heal and a platform to build their new lives in the U.S.

For many of our participants, the farm is a familiar atmosphere; many of them come from agricultural backgrounds, and it invigorates them to see how beneficial -- and popular -- urban agriculture is in the United States. For those without a background or professional interest in farming, the program still provides valuable job-readiness skills, English-language immersion, a vast professional network, and a tranquil environment far removed from the anxieties of life as a refugee. The psychological benefits become apparent shortly into the season, and 80% of our participants have reported a decrease in anxiety and depression.



The positive results of the program were really on display at our RIF graduation in October. We felt like one big extended family, up on the rooftop of our Brooklyn Grange partners, discussing everyone's new jobs, housing, and plans for the future. From Cuba to Congo and beyond, our participants have survived some very harrowing ordeals -- to see them happy, confident, and ready to tackle the future was inspiring.

And the best part is, our work doesn't end with the arrival of autumn. We have exciting plans ahead, detailed at the end of this report. See you all soon.

~ Your friends from RIF

2014 in Review

12 PARTICIPANTS
from **9** COUNTRIES

6 FULL MONTHS of
URBAN AGRICULTURE TRAINING,
JOB-READINESS WORKSHOPS,
& ENGLISH-LANGUAGE IMMERSION

1 Very Successful
FUNDRAISER

COUNTLESS
FRIENDSHIPS,
AMERICAN ACQUAINTANCES,
& PROFESSIONAL
CONTACTS MADE

12 MATCHED WITH A
PRO BONO LEGAL
ATTORNEY*

**(Human Rights First
& Immigration Law Project)*

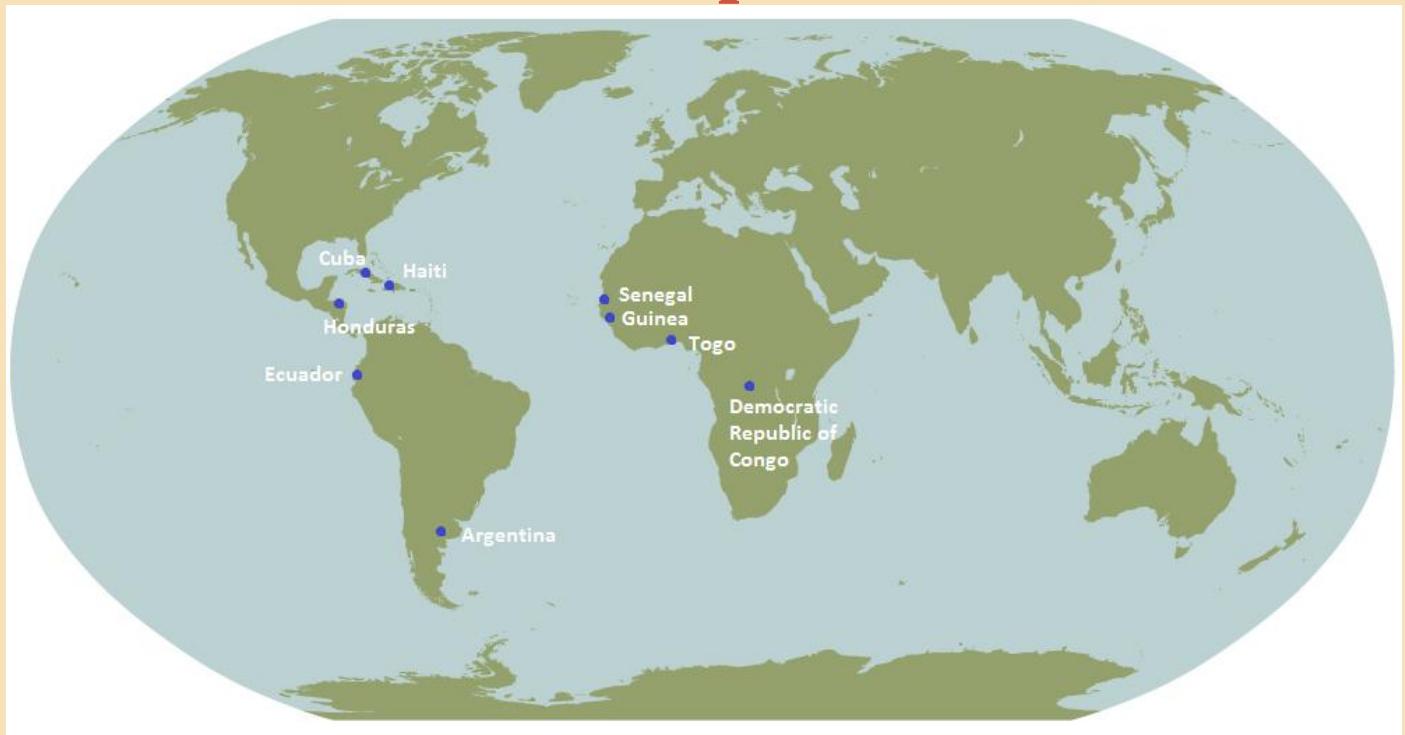
10 MATCHED WITH
MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS*
AND PRO BONO
PRIVATE THERAPISTS

**Bellevue Program for Torture Survivors,
Libertas (Elmhurst Hospital Center)*

40 CLIENTS REFERRED to
PRO BONO LEGAL CLINICS

...AS WELL AS
NEW JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOUND,
HOUSING SECURED,
PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALING,
& ASYLUM CASES WON

Where Our Participants Come From



In 2013 there were 10.4 million refugees worldwide, as well as 33.3 million internally displaced people fleeing war, natural disaster, political instability, or persecution. The United States received over 88,000 asylum requests in 2013 alone, and New York receives the third largest intake of asylum seekers after Texas and California.

In 2014, RIF participants came from 9 different countries spanning Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Their reasons for coming -- political or gender-based persecution, familial abuse, and war, among others -- are typical of what the larger refugee community has gone through before arriving in the U.S.

“Many of the participants have told me that when they are at the farm, they experience a sense of peace and stillness that is deeply refreshing and relieving from the mental turbulence they endure on a daily basis.”

~ RIF Volunteer



Green Jobs & Professional Development

The Urban Farm Recovery Project introduces participants to the many opportunities available in New York's "Green" economy and makes them environmental stewards of the city.

Throughout the season, participants receive professional resume writing assistance, participate in mock job interviews, make various professional contacts, and gain more confidence to enter the U.S. job market.

"Francisco understands the larger implications of urban agriculture in a way that has truly enriched both his, and certainly my own, experience at the farm."

~ Brooklyn Grange Trainee



Francisco

After a harrowing journey to the U.S. and a long, drawn-out asylum process, Francisco was finally reunited with his family in New York in the dead of winter. The harsh weather and his unfamiliarity with the city kept him home-bound for the first few months, bored and frustrated.

An engineer and urban farmer in his native Cuba, the Urban Farm Recovery Project provided an outlet for his interests and professional goals, and gave him a sense of purpose in his new home. His English quickly improved and he began making valuable contacts in the city's thriving urban agriculture scene.

Now thanks to a new collaborative effort launched by RIF this year, Francisco has secured a full-time job with Gotham Greens, the nation's first commercial-scale rooftop greenhouse. The work allows him to pursue his agricultural interests while earning a steady, reliable income.

"When I first met Francisco, his English was little to none. Now that the season is almost over, his language skills have improved immensely and he continues to make speaking his priority while on the farm. I hope to see Francisco work towards advancing his career in urban agriculture and remain the warm, carefree, and determined person he is."

~ RIF Volunteer

Psychological Healing



Chantal

Before arriving in the U.S., Chantal ran a nonprofit organization in the Democratic Republic of Congo that provided healthcare and psychological assistance to women and children victims of violence. Persecution forced her to flee, leaving her work and her family behind.

The stress of her situation caused her to fall into a massive depression; anxiety-induced migraines left her hospitalized for a month.

Slowly, the therapeutic benefits of the farm lifted her out of her depression, as she found solace in the family-like atmosphere of the program. Now she hopes to reenter the nonprofit field and continue her advocacy work.

Life in New York City can be difficult, especially if you don't speak the language, have nowhere to live, and carry deep psychological wounds from past trauma. This is the situation most of our participants are in when they come to RIF.

The Urban Farm Recovery Project gives them a tranquil environment far removed from the stress of everyday life as a refugee. Participants have stated that the tight-knit atmosphere of the program and tranquility of the farm help them begin the long healing process. Their psychologists have also noted major progress by the end of the season.

"Chantal continues to have an optimistic attitude, never letting the challenges of her life get to her. She has opened up to many of us about her struggles, and she continues to remain hopeful, stay humble, and take advantage of every opportunity she is given."

~ RIF Volunteer

"Chantal has truly come to epitomize the psychological transformation that our participants experience. She is often vocal about how essential the therapeutic labor and familial-like relationships on the farm have been in her recovery and acclimation to life in New York. According to Chantal, they have helped her both escape and fight through her struggles."

~ RIF Volunteer

“I get to interact with the participants every week. We really get to form a friendship, and I think that's the most important thing. You're building trust with people, and if you can build trust, if they can believe that you're going to help them the best way possible and that they can confide in you, it really changes the whole dynamic. All of that is made possible by doing things like this.”

~ RIF Volunteer



Advocacy

RIF is developing a strategic advocacy program to educate students on the challenges faced by asylum seekers in New York. In Spring 2014:

- An asylum seeker and Urban Farm Recovery Project participant presented her situation to the New School Department of International Affairs
- A group of students from the Connecticut College Department of Anthropology visited our participants at the Brooklyn Grange's Long Island City farm
- An asylum seeker discussed the challenges facing LGBT asylum seekers at Kingsborough Community College and Rutgers University





Looking Ahead

The Community Keeps Growing...

For 2015, we have lots of exciting projects and we're looking forward to getting you involved. Here are just some of the developments at RIF:

We are starting new post-farm season workshops to provide an on-going support system for our participants: the first one will be on how to obtain a food protection license that can open new opportunities in the food and restaurant businesses. Many of our African women have plenty of ideas for small food business ventures but need some guidance as to where and how to get started.

Other workshops will focus on green jobs and training opportunities such as the one provided by LaGuardia Community College's ACE Green Task Force. With the training at Brooklyn Grange under their belt, our participants have the experience to really excel in that field. We are also thrilled that our friends at Gotham Greens have provided job opportunities for our participants.

We also plan to expand our new advocacy efforts to educate more students on the underserved refugee and asylum seeker population in the city. Several asylum seekers have already made powerful presentations at the New School, Rutgers, and other universities. At the Brooklyn Grange, many American trainees working alongside our participants have become much more aware of their challenges; many of them were so moved that they provided help on an individual basis but now want to get more involved to help new asylum seekers.

In the upcoming year we'd really like to find or share a space where we can accommodate a support group for asylum seekers arriving in New York. If anyone knows of a donated space, please contact us immediately!

Finally, we are of course looking forward already to Spring 2015 to launch a new season of the Urban Farm Recovery Project. As we all know, being outdoors, surrounded by plants and vegetables (and some chickens) creates miracles: we become happy and generous. We look forward to growing together with you in 2015!

Thank You!

The New School Department of International Affairs

Professor Mark Johnson - *for your amazing support for grassroots organizations*

Myriam Bestowrouss, Colleen Gilmore, and Liz Campbell (students)

Frank Raffaele & COFFEED - *for your generosity and great coffee!*

Victor Loaiza-Mejia at **Gotham Greens** - *for connecting our participants with job opportunities*

Daniel Levine Spond - *for always stepping up to the plate and making a huge difference*

Ellen Friedland - *for winning so many asylum cases*

Amanda Amodio - *for always willing to provide mental health support*

The **Brooklyn Grange** folks, with special thanks to Ben Flanner, Matt Jefferson, and Alia Ornstein for being who you are

Ingrid Nystrom - *Mother-in-law...for always liking us on Facebook!*

And to our supporters, whose financial support is the backbone of our work (in alphabetical order):

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...Thanks for your support!



Refugee & Immigrant Fund
32-13 37th Street
Astoria, NY 11103
info@rifnyc.org

www.RIFnyc.org