

World Refugee Day 2017

Bret Weber, Grand Forks City Council – June 17, 2017

We are all immigrants. Even those who lived here before Columbus are simply immigrants who have just lived here longer! In almost all cases, we all have at least one ancestor--a parent, grandparent, or great grandparent--who migrated to Grand Forks, to North Dakota, and to the United States of America.

Unfortunately, this nation's history has frequently been marked by periods of great animosity towards immigrants, even though this is a country whose story is writ large with the struggles and triumphs, and with the contributions of immigrants.

Two hundred years ago, this country was being built by the labor of hardworking immigrants. Germans and Irish immigrants helped to build the Erie Canal even as they were demonized as monkeys and less than human. Those were people who had often been forced to leave their homes for one reason or another.

One hundred years ago, this country was still being built by the labor of hardworking immigrants including people from Scandinavia. People who often experienced prejudice and unjust treatment.

“[R]efugees are people with families, and histories, and skills. Refugees are individuals who have been tempered by challenge and hardship, survivors with great strength and courage. . .”

Fifty years ago, immigrants from Latin America and Southeast Asia were helping to make the U.S. the world's breadbasket.

And today, immigrants continue to provide much of the most grueling labor necessary to keep our national, state, and local economy strong. Additionally, immigrants bring their own wealth in terms of cultural richness, intelligence, entrepreneurial energy, and innovation to the diverse tapestry that is the United States

Those who speak ill of immigrants risk villainizing their neighbors and their own families.

But, while all refugees are immigrants, not all immigrants are refugees. Refugees are SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS.

Refugees are persons who have been FORCED to flee from their homes due to persecution, war, violence, and famine. No one wants to be a refugee. And, it is likely that few ever dreamed of moving from their homes on the other side of the globe to live in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Quite possibly few had ever heard of Grand Forks or even North Dakota.

The term refugee may conjure images of vulnerable persons, of victims, and of people with little or no ability to control their own destinies. Think for a moment: when you hear the word refugee, what image comes to mind?

Now, consider a different image. Understand that refugees are people with families, and histories, and skills. Refugees are individuals who have been tempered by challenge and hardship, survivors with great strength and courage, people who we, all the people of Grand Forks, are fortunate to have as neighbors and as new members of our community.

Refugees are people who hold the promise to make us all stronger!

In our current political debates about refugees, which are so often hurtful and divisive, there has been much talk about the costs to US society. Few people realize that the amount of support, almost all borne by the federal government, is limited to less than \$4,000 per individual, much of which they have to repay. And, special, direct support is terminated after just eight months.

Imagine being forced from your home, moved to a society where you may not speak the language or understand the culture, and then being expected to be self-sufficient after just eight months. Most would find it difficult if not impossible to rise to such a challenge.

Every day, refugees do exactly that in our community—they rise to that challenge and achieve self-sufficiency.

As a community and a nation, we need to move beyond this simplistic discussion of the costs and recognize that refugees are a rich benefit to our society. They bring their energy, labor, wisdom, and fortitude. Many of our largest employers would not be growing their businesses in Grand Forks today were it not for this energetic infusion to our work force.

Refugees are people who not only hold the promise to make us all stronger, their presence has already made us all stronger!

On behalf of Mayor Brown, the Grand Forks City Council, and the people of our great city, congratulations to those individuals who have recently become new citizens of the USA!

Welcome to the United States of America, and welcome to Grand Forks, your new home.