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where all voices are heard



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FREE ~ GRATIS

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Why People Seek Asylum

by Nora Haenn

Asylum seekers are reluctant travelers. They would stay home if they could, but they cannot. I learned this listening to women at an ICE detention center in Texas. In March, I joined a volunteer legal team and spoke at length and in confidence with women seeking asylum. I had heard that past US immigration policy helped set in motion events that allowed criminal gangs to dominate Central America. But this was my first time witnessing the wave of asylum seekers this history gave rise to.

Detention centers hold women and their children awaiting a “credible fear interview.” (Men are held in separate facilities.) In the interview, an immigration officer determines whether a woman’s fear of returning home is reasonable. Would her life, or the lives of her children, be jeopardized? If the officer finds reasonable fear, the asylum seeker can remain in the United States to apply for residency. Her chances of securing safe harbor depends on where she lands. The immigration court in Charlotte has a reputation as one of the toughest. Nationally, 57 percent of asylum seekers lose their cases. In Charlotte, 84 percent of asylum seekers are turned away.

Our team did not share these statistics with the women. Their situations were difficult enough. Take the case of Wendy, a 23-year-old from Guatemala. Wendy fled with her husband and their two children after gang members threatened all their lives. I heard enough versions of Wendy’s story to think of some asylum seekers as living out a Hollywood horror movie. They were going about their everyday lives when some chance event swept them into a criminal world they could not escape.

Wendy’s experience was not the worst I heard, just the one I can report in a family newspaper.

Wendy described life before the gang: “We were poor, but we were happy. We lived well.” Wendy and her family lived surrounded by relatives in a small town. She and her husband held modest-paying jobs. Wendy is unsure where the gang members came from, but the three men focused on her and her husband relentlessly. First, the men requested the couple visit area businesses and convey the gang’s demands for bribes. Wendy and her husband refused. They were law-abiding people and had also heard such messengers were killed once they were no longer useful.

Then, the gang members demanded Wendy and her husband hand over part of their salaries. The demands escalated until the gang insisted the couple hand over the entirety of their earnings or watch their children be assassinated before being killed themselves. The gang gave the couple time to think about their options during which a watchman posted outside the couple’s home observed their comings and goings. The couple fled after Wendy was assaulted by the gang. Wendy had just dropped off her children at school and was returning home by a hidden path when three men surprised her. The attack, they said, was a final warning.

Where were the police in all this? Wendy’s town had almost no police presence, but even if she had sought them out, she had no confidence authorities would help. Women from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador told us local police received bribes from the gangs, served as gang informants, or had ceded territory to the gangs. The gangs were basically operating as the

local government.

Could Wendy have fled to another place in Guatemala? She had no relatives outside her hometown and would be unlikely to find safety even if she did. Wendy’s local gang was part of a larger network. Women told us of gang members using their national contacts to hound them. In cases of domestic violence, women’s abusers used gang networks to stalk them.

Wendy saw safety in the United States, not knowing our country gave birth to the gangs she fled. Central America’s criminal groups got their start in the 1980s among immigrant youth in Los Angeles. Many of the youths’ families had fled US-funded wars in Central America and were given temporary asylum. When those temporary permits expired, young people were deported to Central America, and the United States inadvertently created international crime networks.

When Wendy told me that she would be staying with a relative in California, I felt relief. She would not stand before a Charlotte judge. Wendy is just the kind of person I want as a neighbor, but her chances in North Carolina were slim. Finishing our conversation, I helped her with a question the immigration officer was sure to pose: “Do you belong to a persecuted group?” She did, because the United States recognized the gang’s role as a local government made Wendy a political protestor, although Attorney General Jeff Sessions has since closed this avenue to asylum. I encouraged her to add a second point. Wendy was victimized for belonging to the group of people who are honest, hardworking, and want to live their lives in peace.

Nora Haenn is a Chatham resident. She teaches anthropology and International Studies at North Carolina State University.

Hot Fun in the Summertime at Summer Fest

by Randy Voller



Jim Crawford and Maureen Ahmad of the Chatham Cider Works

Local law enforcement officials were up early, stayed hydrated, and remained late to handle traffic and crowd control to ensure that the Pittsboro Summer Fest held on July 1st was a good experience for all.

With quotes like “top notch music”, “a good opportunity to enjoy family entertainment in Pittsboro without having to travel”, and “such a great event”, the consensus on the street was that the “Pittsboro Summer Fest” version 3.0 was a scorching success.

And “scorching” was the operative word as visitors and locals alike all broke a sweat together and collectively experienced the true meaning of a July “heat index” in the North Carolina Piedmont.

While local musicians such as “The Dowdy Boys”, “The Unmentionables”, and “Liquid Pleasure” blazed through their sets entertaining a diverse crowd, the community found a way to forget their problems for a day and enjoy each other’s company. A phenomenon best summarized by local business owner, Paige Skelton of Cackalacky, who opined, “This is exactly why we love to call Pittsboro home. All kinds of folks having all kinds of fun.”

Greg Lewis, the owner of the Pittsboro Roadhouse and a board member of Main Street Pittsboro, thought it was one of the biggest crowds he had seen in downtown Pittsboro and said, “Our laser light company guessed seven to eight thousand people were there at 9 p.m. for Liquid Pleasure and the laser show. It was amazing to see all of those people on Hillsboro Street.”

Longtime Chathamite Laura Lauffer thought so as well and said, “I think for the Fall Festival we should open up main street and the businesses just like Summer Fest.”

Attendees were pleased to see a diverse crowd from Chatham County and beyond enjoying the music and a downtown filled with happy people young and old.

To that point, local Pittsboro artist and musician, John Makowski, was moved to observe, “This is as close as I have seen Pittsboro be a community that is pulling together. This is the kind of event that the community needs more of—seeing your neighbors out and being a part of a bigger community.”

Of course it wasn’t just the locals who felt the vibe while braving the weather.

“It is really nice to see a small town come together,” said Nancy Martin of Raleigh, “we are all supporting the local businesses and bearing the heat together.”

Martin was with her friend Kitty Mecham, who is the owner of the Hillsboro Street arts emporium Liquidambar Gallery. Like many, they ended their evening South of the circle at “The Modern Life Deli” known locally as “The Mod” to enjoy the atmosphere, cool drinks and the most luxurious of all modern conveniences: air conditioning.

Summer Fest was a culmination of planning, cooperation, and execution by the Town of Pittsboro, Chatham County, the Pittsboro Business Association and Main Street Pittsboro, who pulled together to shut down Hillsboro Street and create an event that was family friendly and a great reflection of the Circle City (Pittsboro) and Chatham County.

Chatham Transit provided shuttles to park and ride locations at Alpha Center, CCCC and Pittsboro Pet Supply, while many others such as local artist and educator Linda Collura and her partner George DeSocio walked from their nearby homes.

The credit for the event’s success will be shared by many with specific kudos to Maria Parker-Lewis, a board member of the Pittsboro Business Association (“PBA”) and the President of Main Street Pittsboro, and Pam Fulk, the President of the

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‘Sit Spot’ Ideal For Spending Time in Meditation, Joy

by Joe Jacob

I keep trying to make sense of this crazy world we live in. It seems we run around trying to get everything done, but never have enough time. It is ironic because time is all we really have, we just don’t know how much of it is still remaining. You see, I have this belief that the gift we are given for coming into this world is time and the freedom to use it as we want, but we really don’t know how much time we have. Some of us die young while others live to be over 100.

Since we don’t know how long we are going to be on this earth, as we grow older, we need something to ground us so that we use what time we do have in the best way possible. We don’t want to feel that we have wasted our time. When we were kids, all that mattered was having fun and we spent a lot of time doing it. But did we really? No, not if we lived to be 100. If we only lived to be 10, I suppose it was time well spent. If we lived to be 30, some might say we wasted the better part of our life by not being productive.

You see how elusive time is? Time is different for everyone. It is just not about the amount of time we have, but the quality of time we have, on what we spend our time and whether or not it has brought joy to us while we are here. To some, what we spend time on is a waste of time and to others it is an investment. How can that be to one and different to another? The fact is that none of us knows how much time we have left, so how can anyone make that kind of judgement and be accurate? But we do make that kind of judgement about ourselves and others all the time.

Well you might say, “it is just a matter of making choices and setting priorities. There is always enough time to do what is important.” My reply would be to say to you, “yeah, tell that to a terminally ill person”. See what a slippery concept time is? I think that if there is one thing we can all agree about time is that we should find joy and happiness while we are on this earth and in the process not deny joy and happiness to others.

So, how you use your time is not an issue of being wasteful or productive. The point is, does how you spend your time bring joy and happiness into your life? If you have read anything I have written in the past, you know that spending time in Nature brings a great deal of joy and happiness into

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