
https://buffalonews.com/business/local/carolynn-welch-knows-firsthand-how-immigrants-enrich-buffalo/article_5a669f20-6b58-11ec-9a45-2b2e36baf278.html

For more than five years, Carolynn Welch, executive director of the Westminster Economic Development Initiative, has had a front-row seat watching how immigrants have shaped and enriched the City of Buffalo.

WEDI provides educational and financial resources to help immigrants in Buffalo grow and succeed, including the West Side Bazaar **restaurant** and retail incubator.

Its programming has helped thousands of students and churned out hundreds of entrepreneurs.

Q: For decades there has been a negative drumbeat of "Buffalo's population is shrinking. The population is shrinking." Have you spoken much about how immigrants have helped to grow the city's population?

A: We do to a certain degree. I think we talk more about what the immigrant and refugee population has done for Buffalo in terms of small business. You know, what's happening on the west side on Grant Street in that area, really being revitalized and really focused on how great the immigrant and refugee population is for the economy of Buffalo.



Round the world via takeout at West Side Bazaar

The West Side and Grant Street are a stellar example of what has happened when our communities have become more enriched with immigrants and refugees.

Many of those businesses are immigrant- or refugee-owned properties that we've seen really change over the past decade. The community has become a safer community. We've seen the economy grow as opposed to continuing to stagnate.

Q: Are there certain things you wish people knew more about immigrants that maybe they don't understand?

A: I wish people would understand more that they're enriching our area, they're not detracting from our area. They're not taking jobs away. They're not doing any of those things.

It's more of an enrichment in terms of what Buffalo has to offer. The West Side is a huge example of that. It has really turned into this cultural hub in the city.

People come because they want to learn more, they want to experience, they want to try the diversity, they want to understand where people are coming from.

It's really become like this unique, safe space where you can explore different cultures and learn more about different cultures and their impact on the city of Buffalo.

Q: Where would Buffalo be right now without the influx of of immigration that we've had?

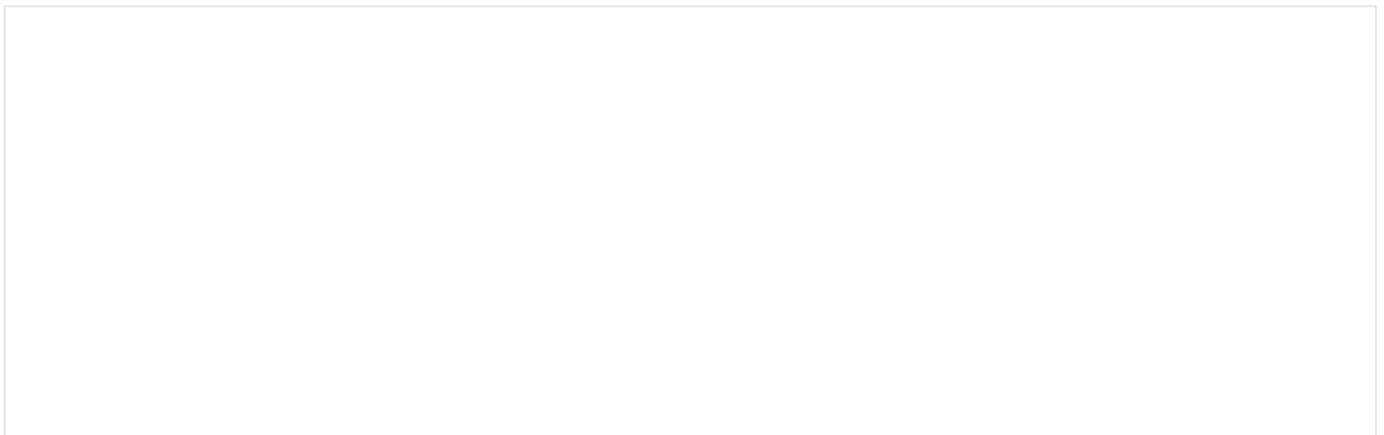
A: We'd definitely not be experiencing the growth in our population. We wouldn't be experiencing the boom in our economy if it wasn't for immigrants and refugees.

I think it also is changing the face of Buffalo. The West Side of Buffalo is one of the most diverse places in the city. And I think, as a city, we need that. We need that cultural richness because we've struggled in terms of the diversity of our communities.

Q: Some immigration was paused during the previous presidential administration. How did that affect things here?

A: I think it definitely slowed some of the growth we are seeing on the West Side and also the Black Rock community where a lot of our immigrants and refugees settle.

With WEDI, we saw not a huge decrease but a decrease in the number of students looking for our after-school programs.





Grant Street Bazaar's international food hall transforms lives, builds community

It definitely put a hitch in the momentum, going from a couple of thousand refugees a year to hundreds, it's just a huge difference.

Q: How does Buffalo benefit when immigrants and refugees bring family members here or grow their families?

A: You have a distinct population that's settling in one area. You see those corner stores come back and you see those local restaurants and local shops come back because people are staying within their community and utilizing them. They're bringing more people to access all of those things.

The needs of a community increase, which in turn increases the Buffalo economy. And it makes a difference for everybody. You get back that sense of community that has kind of gotten lost along the way.

Q: Is it a myth that first-generation Americans tend to be more entrepreneurial?

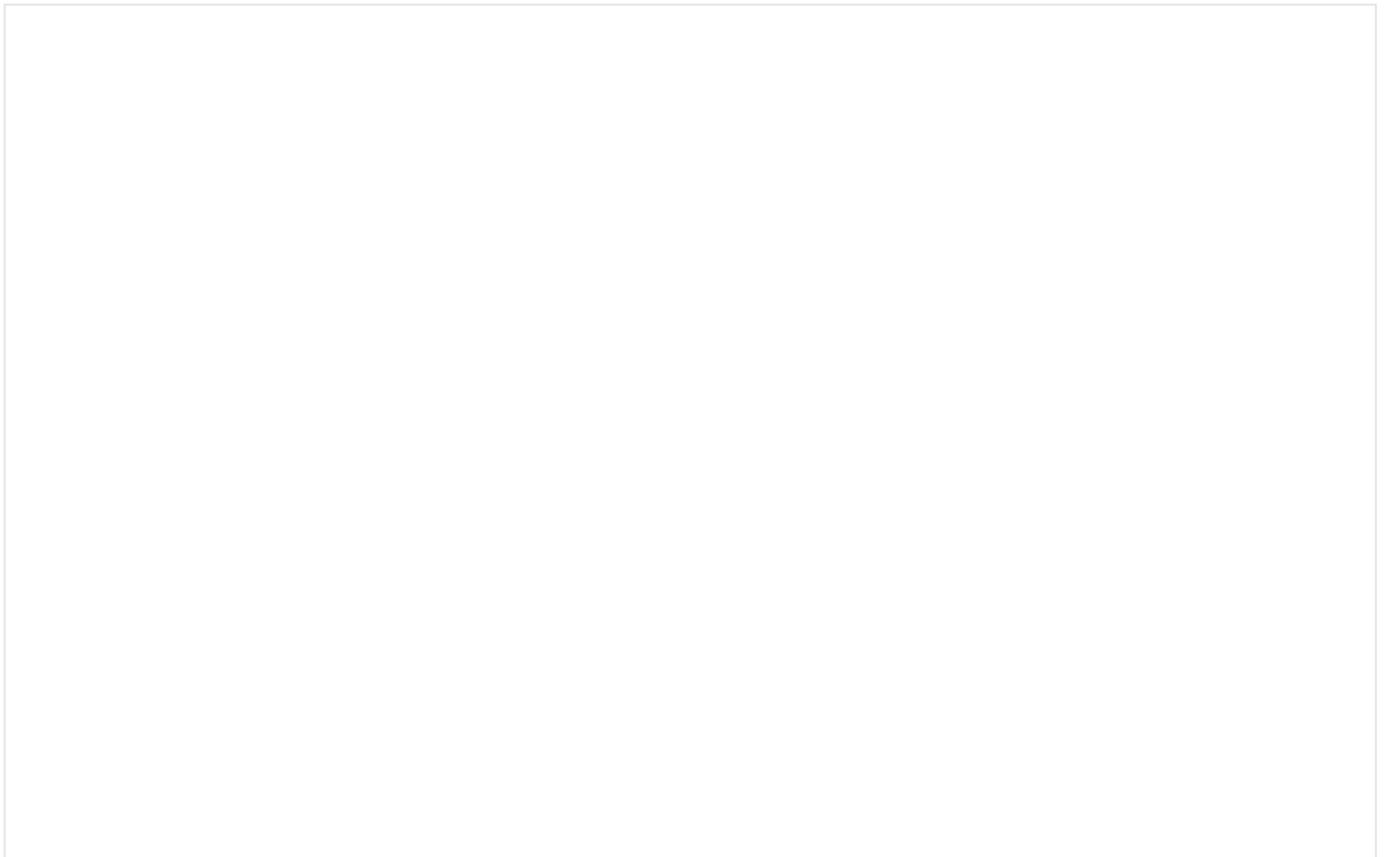
A: I think when somebody comes here, oftentimes what somebody does in their country does not translate to something that they can continue to do when they're in Buffalo.

Pharmacy degrees, nursing degrees, doctor degrees, engineering degrees, often don't translate to the same degree in the United States. So people have to start over.

They're looking for ways to support their family and continue to grow their life, and really leaving their former career behind oftentimes, just because it's really cost prohibitive for them to get another degree.

The time derivative or even literacy levels have a huge impact on going back to college and getting your degree all over again, or getting your licensing.

I think you can kind of take your success into your own hands. The barriers aren't there with trying to find a job and trying to navigate that market.





Architect hired to design new West Side Bazaar location

It does take another complete skill set to be able to start your own business. It's not easy by any means, but they have the ability to take control and get things started.

Q: There have got to be so many difficulties and opportunities in terms of language. How do you bridge language barriers?

A:

Most of the people that we work with, they know multiple languages. They're not like us where we just know English. They know two or three different languages, and sometimes there's a common denominator. That might be French, a lot of different populations are familiar with French.

There's a long way to go in terms of translation and interpretation services, but I don't know that there's an easy answer because there are so many different languages. It's kind of an uphill battle.

Q: How do you use Journey's End?

A: We use them for translating documents like our loan documents, our manual for the West Side Bazaar, anything that somebody needs to understand in order to be successful within our programs. Sometimes we'll use them to communicate with family members of our students. We've used them with with some of our staff.

We don't obviously ever want to have somebody agree to something that they don't understand what they're agreeing to.

Q: Do you hear a lot of the misconceptions about communities that absorb a lot of immigrants?

A: I haven't run into it a ton. I think it's the things you hear on Fox News: that people are getting a free ride or they're getting all these social services and they're costing us money; that they're not contributing to the economy, they're taking away jobs from from other people. Those are some huge misconceptions that you see out there.

When the reality is that most people are coming here and they're working their butt off. They're getting a job and forming a career and they're self-sufficient. It's not the other way around.

Q: What can Buffalo do to better embrace immigrant residents and create a more successful community for everybody?

A: I think we just need to continue to understand each other and learn more about each other.

One of the most powerful things about the Bazaar that people seem really interested in is learning people's stories: Where they came from, what their path to Buffalo was, why they took that path to Buffalo, what prompted them to move or what circumstances made it so they had to move if they had no choice.

Just continuing to explore the different cultures and understand the people's perspectives is always beneficial for everyone. The more we can learn about each other's cultures, that makes us richer, and makes this a more beautiful place.



West Side Bazaar makes plans for new home on Niagara Street

Q: What can we look forward to with WEDI this year?

A: We have the West Side Bazaar expansion project. We are very hopeful to start construction in the first quarter of 2022 and then have the new Bazaar up and running by the first quarter of 2023. That's what we're aiming for if everything goes as planned. I don't think anything goes as planned though.

The new space is going to give us more room to have more entrepreneurs. So we will have eight restaurants with kitchen access where we currently only have four.

We will have more retail. We are finally going to be able to offer the opportunity for service industries to be part of the Bazaar that we haven't been able to due to space constraints. And then we're also going to have more events.

There's the client perspective of strengthening our incubator. And then there's the customer perspective of providing more to our community and having a safe space to learn about different cultures. People want to do events at the Bazaar but it's just really busy and there isn't enough space.

Q: What kind of service companies will you be able to have?

A: Salons, barbers, nails, business services. We had an accountant several years ago and they were in one of our little retail booths and there's just too much action happening. It's not private enough to discuss finances. It's too loud. So, all of those types of businesses that require an appointment or some secluded space to be operational.

Samantha Christmann

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I grew up the daughter of a steelworker in North Tonawanda. I've been a business reporter for The News since 2008 and write the Discount Diva column, which appears in every Sunday's paper.