

New book gathers local immigrant students stories

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

A new book and multimedia project was released Wednesday with an unlikely cast of authors and producers: 30 young people who moved recently to Rochester and Buffalo from points around the world.

Gunasekera Subasinghe misses playing cricket in Sri Lanka but does not miss the cobras and crocodiles.

Muna Ismael came to Buffalo from Somalia by way of Ethiopia. She remembered missing school because her father could not find work to pay the fees.

Stivia Jorgji moved to Rochester with her family from Albania in search of better health care and education.

Their stories and those of their peers from around the world were gathered by Green Card Youth Voices, a Minneapolis- based organization whose purpose is to share first-person accounts from young immigrants and refugees. This is the organization’s sixth book, each drawn from a different part of the country.

The book containing all the students’ stories is titled “Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from Upstate New York High Schools.” It is available now as an e-book and will be released next month in paperback. More information and students’ first-person videos are available at www.greencardvoices.org.

One of the organization’s goals is to recognize the full spectrum of newcomers’ experiences: gratitude but also longing, fear but also excitement.

Many of the students came to America as refugees, but not all. Some won green cards and some came when their parents accepted jobs here. They represent 15 countries plus Puerto Rico. In Rochester the students were interviewed in the Rochester and Brighton school districts.

for me.” In particular, he said, he misses shashlik, a version of shish kebab, and beshbarmak, a traditional dish with meat, dough and onion sauce.

The last several years have been challenging for new Americans, and the toll was reflected in the Green Card project. Two of the school programs involved, the Bilingual Language and Literacy Academy in Rochester and Lafayette Newcomer Academy in Buffalo, were closed at the end of the 2019-20 school year due to lower enrollment and lacking funds.

Analy Cruz-Phonmanny, the director of bilingual education at the Rochester City School District, recalled her own journey to the United States as a child and the persistent feeling of being “de aquí y de allá” — from here and from there.

“The reality,” she said, “is that we are from here *and* from there.”

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Alex Tsipenyuk, originally from Kazakhstan and now a student at Brighton High School. PROVIDED

Each student read an excerpt of their essay Wednesday night on Zoom (this was the project's first-ever online book launch). Some told about their life in their home country; others discussed their career aspirations or compared the two places.

“There are definitely things I miss,” said Alex Tsipenyuk, a Brighton High School student who came from Kazakhstan. “I had to give up all my friends and making connections here became really hard challenge

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