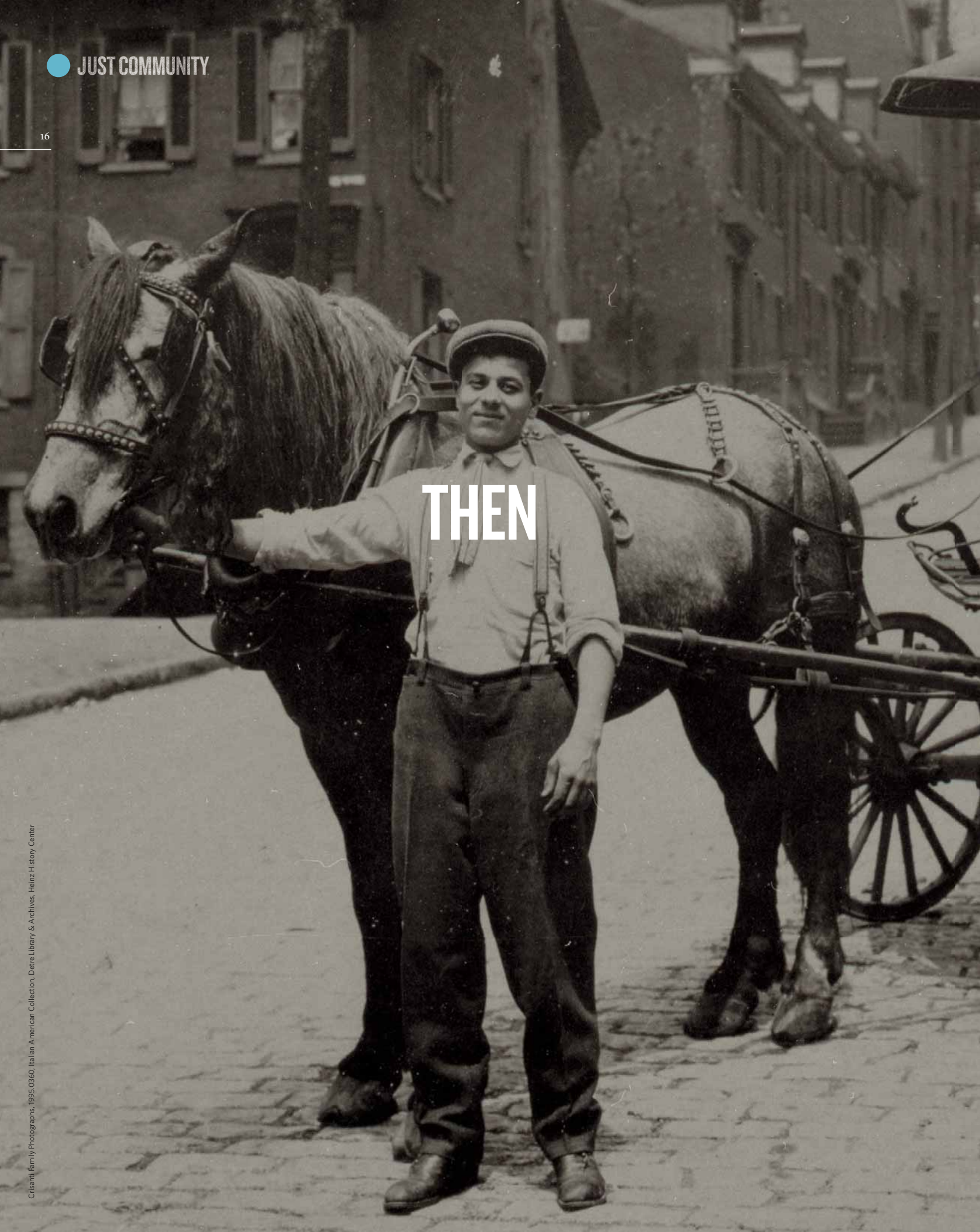


THEN





TO NOW

PITTSBURGH'S IMMIGRANT STORY

**HELPING IMMIGRANTS
FEEL MORE AT HOME
IN PITTSBURGH
MAY BE A MATTER OF
DEVISING THE RIGHT
WELCOME "BLUEPRINT."
BY BEN WECHT**

At the turn of the last century, many immigrants in Pittsburgh were Europeans like Frank Crisanti, opposite page, who moved to Pittsburgh from Sicily in 1908 and drove his horse-drawn wagon through city streets to peddle fruits and vegetables. Current immigrants come to the city from countries across the globe, including Bashir Alghussein, this page, who arrived in 2015 from Palestine, where he was a lawyer. Having completed a master's degree in law at the University of Pittsburgh this summer, he now has an unpaid internship with the United Steelworkers, which has been "a good experience in learning how systems in this country work."

LIKE OTHER AMERICAN URBAN CENTERS, PITTSBURGH IS A CITY OF IMMIGRANTS.

From the Carnegies and Mellons and thousands of other northern Europeans who helped lay its economic foundations in the 1800s, to the Slovak and other largely eastern and southern European populations who fueled its steel mills and excavated its mines around the turn of the last century, to those of African or Asian descent and others who found their way here around the mid-1900s for reasons of both opportunity and sanctuary, this region's immigrant narrative is a familiar one—up to a point.

Whereas other cities—from major metropolitan centers like New York and Los Angeles to more comparably sized places like Buffalo and Baltimore—continued to both attract and accommodate immigrants throughout the end of the last century and into this one, Pittsburgh has experienced a long-term flattening of such trends. The result, say experts and service providers, has been not just a loss of diversity and economic possibilities, but also a corresponding decline in the ability of government and nonprofit agencies to readily provide for the needs of those immigrants who do find their way here.

Now, with refugees from Bhutan and Burma moving into communities like Jefferson Hills, and the foreign-born Latino population making a historic surge in the region, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and other community partners are working to ensure that those needs are met.



NAME Annette Camara **FROM** Republic of Guinea **OCCUPATION** Group home aide
PITTSBURGH ARRIVAL 1997 **PITTSBURGH EXPERIENCE** “It’s been great living in Pittsburgh. I was able to go to school and earn a bachelor degree. I’m raising my three kids in a city that has evolved nicely in welcoming Immigrants.”

“Our region did not experience the growth in immigrant populations that other cities experienced in the ’80s because we were struggling economically with the collapse of the steel industry,” explained Barbara Murock, manager of the human services department’s Immigrants and International (I&I) Initiative, which was established in 2007 to help foreign-born residents achieve greater self-sufficiency and community integration. “So the growing diversity is new to us and challenges us to make sure our services and systems are readily accessible to people with different languages and cultures.”

The effort began in earnest in the spring of 2013, when the I&I Initiative undertook a “scan and needs assessment” of the immigrant community, using a combination of census and administrative data as well as interviews with providers to explore and document current and emerging human services needs, gaps and barriers. What that exercise reported was significant.

While the county’s population of just over 57,000 foreign-born residents, as of 2011, represented an increase—the first, in fact, since the early 20th century—it still fell behind comparable regions in number and, at less than 5 percent of the total, in proportion as well.

Also, a relatively small group of providers offers the majority of services to new immigrants, often without effective coordination. The challenges facing the international community focus on



NAME Kheir Mugwaneza **FROM** Rwanda **OCCUPATION** Director of the Refugee Resettlement Program at the Northern Area Multi Service Center **PITTSBURGH ARRIVAL** 2000 **PITTSBURGH EXPERIENCE** "It's been great, challenging in some aspects because I came here as a student and then had to go through the process to become a citizen. But I met my wife here, and we have two sons. Pittsburgh is my home."

language barriers and service navigation, but also include transportation, behavioral health services, employment, job training, education and more.

Building on these findings, The Heinz Endowments last June awarded \$45,000 to DHS to develop a community-wide immigrant "blueprint" for action. Together with a \$15,000 grant from the Jefferson Regional Foundation and support from other Pittsburgh-area foundations, this funding enabled 173 residents from numerous sectors, half of them immigrants themselves, to create a comprehensive strategy for the next three to five years. Publicly unveiled in September, the blueprint lays out an action plan centering on six priority areas: language access, health and well-being, education, economic development, family support, and civic engagement.

While there are several strategy steps for each of the priority areas, among the blueprint's overall goals are enhancing the capacity of local organizations and systems to help immigrants improve their English language proficiency; providing immigrant residents with high-quality and culturally appropriate physical and behavioral health care; and enabling educators to support academic success among immigrant students, family engagement in education and lifelong learning. Other objectives include promoting career, entrepreneurial and other economic opportunities for immigrant residents; strengthening family support programs for immigrants; and developing opportunities for immigrants to participate fully in the civic life of the community.



NAME Yuyun Liang **FROM** China **OCCUPATION** Business consultant/environmental engineer **PITTSBURGH ARRIVAL** 2015 **PITTSBURGH EXPERIENCE** "I married and started a new family in Pittsburgh. Now I'm looking for an opportunity to use my skills in environmental engineering, resource management and project development."

"The idea was to say, 'These are the key things that need to happen for immigrants to thrive in our county,' and to create a blueprint or map for the larger community to engage in this process and give them a guide to do so," explained Mary Phan-Gruber, the Jefferson Regional Foundation's executive director.

"Obviously, we can't solve all the issues in five years, or even 10 years," added Kheir Mugwaneza, co-chairman of the I&I Advisory Committee and a 2000 immigrant from Rwanda. "I want to see that at least we have a starting point. We want people to come to Pittsburgh and feel welcome and know where to go for services."

DHS and its partners are looking to the future, which is expected to include an ongoing influx from Bhutan and Burma and the anticipated arrival of new immigrants from Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Having a plan for managing this shifting landscape is of incalculable benefit because a piecemeal approach will not work, explained Carmen Anderson, the Endowments' senior program officer for Children, Youth & Families.

"How do we begin to think holistically about the needs of our immigrant community? The blueprint is the first step in doing that," she said.

DHS Director Marc Cherna agreed. Citing the I&I Initiative's work over the past eight years, he described the blueprint process as having presented "the opportunity to build on those efforts—engaging broad sectors of the community, and contributing to a more vibrant and diverse community where all residents can thrive." **h**