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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Annie — I did quite a bit of reordering, starting with the need to get what the MCC even is farther up in the story. So much of the color, warmth, and mission was just too far in. Of course, you'll let me know if I mangled anything in the process. In the end, it made me want to go there and hang out with them, and I think that makes it a success.

I also wanted to take care to veeeeery subtly distance ECDC from the politicized content of the Fourth Tree website, given the environment we're in, and at the same time give some subliminal reinforcement to the volunteers who were steamed that we vaguely mentioned the unconfirmed sighting of ICE agents in Brattleboro based on info spread by none other than Dan DeWalt.

—J



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 'I want people to feel at home'

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 ECDC's Multicultural Community Center moves to
3 downtown Brattleboro to serve refugees and the volunteers who
4 are helping them discover a new community

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 Light pours in through ample glass surfaces at the newly-
7 opened Multicultural Community Center (MCC) at 28 Vernon St.

8 On any given day, the MCC, a service sponsored by the
9 Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), welcomes
10 new Vermonters of all ages from countries all over the world to
11 the cozy and inviting community space, which is clean and
12 sunny with cultural icons, bright wall hangings, and cheery
13 carpets and furniture, most of which was donated.

14 The organization intends to offer even more
15 programming than it has in the past to new Vermonters, of which
16 more than 400 have been resettled in southern Vermont.

17 ECDC is subleasing from the Brattleboro Museum & Art
18 Center, which plans to use the space to expand its programs;
19 thus, the MCC has a secure home there at least until September,
20 says Site Manager Jenn Mapescouture.

21 “We really jumped on the opportunity because it’s such a
22 great location and we’re wanting to build up programming — to
23 get the community involved in what we do,” she said.

24 Mapescouture brings a lot of the festive decor in
25 “because I just enjoy it and I want people to feel at home.” An
26 uplifting touch is the art of refugee children hanging on walls
27 here and there, too.

28 The MCC previously operated from sites on Birge Street
29 and at the School for International Training (SIT).

30 “We are more determined than ever to provide all the
31 services we can to help new community members feel welcomed
32 and cared for,” said Mapescouture, acknowledging “all the
33 budget cuts and with staffing cuts this past year.”

34 To help new Vermonters build their new lives
35 successfully, the ECDC seeks support from volunteers, who go
36 through background checks before beginning to serve.

37 “One of the things we want to stress to the community is
38 that, as a resettlement agency, we can’t be the end all and be all,”
39 she said.

40 “We literally resettle people, and obviously people need
41 a lot more resources than just the basic 90-day case management
42 that they get through resettlement,” Mapescouture said. “We
43 want people to have those services, so that’s why we call out to
44 the community and ask for support.”

45 That support, she said, comes in the shape of goods,
46 funds, and, especially, volunteer hours.

47 “While the federal model for resettlement is 90 days, we
48 do offer support outside of the 90 days for people who qualify,”
49 said Mapescouture, who has office hours at the MCC, and is
50 often joined by her ECDC colleagues who offer case management
51 there.

52 “We technically will help people for up to five years after
53 arrival with services as needed, but the bulk of resettlement
54 happens within the first three months.”

55 **Connecting new Vermonters**

56 **with support and community**

57 The MCC aims to address several key areas of refugees’
58 needs as gleaned through a survey conducted in 2024 by the
59 University of Vermont.

60 Among those needs: child care at the MCC, conversation
61 partnering, support for families with kids in summer camp,
62 assistance in navigating health systems, job and career advising,
63 and legal preparedness support to ensure access to legal
64 representation and advocacy support.

65 In addition, the MCC offers sewing instruction led by a
66 volunteer skilled seamstress, Deb Rowe.

67 “That’s a staple and something we really want to grow,
68 given it not only teaches new skills, but also offers opportunities
69 to socialize,” says Mapescouture.

70 Art programs for children are offered, too, through River
71 Gallery School's Art for All program, whose manager, Kirsten
72 Martsi, is credited with program development and with scouting
73 the current MCC space.

74 As word gets out that the MCC is available to new
75 Vermonters, the number served will grow, said Mapescouture.
76 "This is a relatively new space, so people are still learning about
77 it."

78 Many of the MCC clients live nearby, some within
79 walking distance, to the center. And, she added, most are
80 working.

81 "The intent with this space is to have it open to the entire
82 community — not just for our new Vermonters, but also for those
83 who serve this population," Mapescouture said. "Volunteers are
84 in and out for various reasons: connecting on efforts, developing
85 and coordinating programs, and just growing community."

86 While ECDC covers costs of various programs' supply
87 needs, much of what is needed will be sought as donations.

88 Mapescouture said MCC lists approximately 130 area
89 volunteers who "have been long-standing in support of this
90 center." ECDC relies on this community and beyond for
91 donations of goods, as well as for assistance with transportation
92 to appointments, hosting events, being conversation partners, and
93 teaching people to drive.

94 "And we're partnering closely with St. Michael's
95 Episcopal Refugee Ministry, whose volunteers are stepping up to
96 help make the MCC a success," Mapescouture added.

97 "When we had the opportunity to open in this location,
98 our partnership with St. Michael's was a key element in planning
99 sustainable programming and services," she said. "I can't
100 overstate my gratitude for that partnership and for the hope and
101 excitement in the vision we share for the space."

102 Mapescouture said that "regardless of how long we are
103 in a particular building or location, this is an amazing
104 opportunity to create the community we want to be a part of, and

105 I see this center as a chance to grow momentum for the work we
106 know is so important to help make our community thrive.”

107 **‘Work of the heart’**

108 Having moved to Vermont four years ago from Nashville
109 by way of a three-year stop in North Carolina, Mapescouture
110 began “volunteering in the community just to learn more about
111 it.”

112 “I never really worked in a nonprofit, and I’ve never
113 worked in a refugee resettlement, but I became very involved as a
114 volunteer when I first got here,” she said.

115 She was exposed to area refugee resettlement efforts
116 through her new neighbors, parishioners at St. Michael’s
117 Episcopal Church.

118 Mapescouture eventually took a staff position at ECDC as
119 a domestic health assessment navigator, “which literally brought
120 people to their first health exams when they came into the
121 country.” After a year, she started working at the SIT multicultural
122 center.

123 “This is really the work of the heart, you know, providing
124 this kind of space for people and additional programming and
125 additional support when they need it,” she said. “What I love
126 about Brattleboro is how dedicated the community is to justice,
127 diversity, and caring for our neighbors.”

128 Mapescouture said that “the landscape for refugees in
129 America is constantly changing,” but the multicultural center will
130 be “here to serve whoever determines they need to be here.”

131 “I’m grateful to have the opportunity to do that,” she
132 said. “We’re looking at the long game, and we want to be here
133 regardless of what’s happening on the political landscape.”

134 Despite that political landscape including sustained
135 occupation of cities in Minnesota, Maine, and Illinois in recent
136 months by officers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement
137 (ICE) and other agencies within the Department of Homeland
138 Security, Mapescouture says “honestly, a lot of the fear that I’ve

139 heard is from long-term Vermonters who are concerned about
140 their neighbors.”

141 Volunteers from Brattleboro Indivisible and the Windham
142 County Action Network have been monitoring the environment
143 and are working to avoid misinformation, rumors, and panic.
144 They post updates on ICE sightings nationwide every four hours.

145 “We just did a training on this last week,” Mapescouture
146 said. “So whenever someone has a question or they hear a rumor,
147 they go directly to that site (4thbranch.us).”

148 With a clear sense of calm and mission, she said she
149 focuses on the work at hand.

150 “Everyone we work with is legally here, but we are going
151 to offer trainings on the paperwork that they need to fill out just
152 in case, and what documents to have on your person. Know your
153 rights. What to answer and what you don’t have to answer,” she
154 said.

155 “But you know, right now, people feel pretty safe in this
156 space,” Mapescouture observed.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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157 For more information on volunteering and on how new
158 Vermonters can gain access to MCC programs, write
159 jmapescouture@ecdcus.org.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

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####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

161

###END LINKS###

VIDEO:

###BEGIN VIDEO###

162

###END VIDEO###

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

###BEGIN LOGLINE###

163

###END LOGLINE###