

Refugees Find Hostility and Hope on Soccer Field  
New York Times, January 21, 2007

By WARREN ST. JOHN

CLARKSTON, Ga., Jan. 20 — Early last summer the mayor of this small town east of Atlanta issued a decree: no more soccer in the town park. “There will be nothing but baseball and football down there as long as I am mayor,” Lee Swaney, a retired owner of a heating and air-conditioning business, told the local paper. “Those fields weren’t made for soccer.”

In Clarkston, soccer means something different than in most places. As many as half the residents are refugees from war-torn countries around the world. Placed by resettlement agencies in a once mostly white town, they receive 90 days of assistance from the government and then are left to fend for themselves. Soccer is their game.

But to many longtime residents, soccer is a sign of unwanted change, as unfamiliar and threatening as the hijabs worn by the Muslim women in town. It’s not football. It’s not baseball. The fields weren’t made for it. Mayor Swaney even has a name for the sort of folks who play the game: the soccer people.

Caught in the middle is a boys soccer program called the Fugees — short for refugees, though most opponents guess the name refers to the hip-hop band.

The Fugees, 9 to 17 years old, play on three teams divided by age. Their story is about children with miserable pasts trying to make good with strangers in a very different and sometimes hostile place. But as a season with the youngest of the three teams revealed, it is also a story about the challenges facing resettled refugees in this country. More than 900,000 have been admitted to the United States since 1993, and their presence seems to bring out the best in some people and the worst in others.

The Fugees’ coach exemplifies the best. A woman volunteering in a league where all the other coaches are men, some of them paid former professionals from Europe, she spends as much time helping her players’ families make new lives here as coaching soccer.

At the other extreme are some town residents, opposing players and even the parents of those players, at their worst hurling racial epithets and making it clear they resent the mostly African team. In a region where passions run high on the subject of illegal immigration, many are unaware or unconcerned that, as refugees, the Fugees are here legally.

“There are no gray areas with the Fugees,” said the coach, Luma Mufleh. “They trigger people’s reactions on class, on race. They speak with accents and don’t seem American. A lot of people get shaken up by that.”

The mayor's soccer ban has everything to do with why, on a scorching August afternoon, Ms. Mufleh — or Coach Luma, as she is known in the refugee community — is holding tryouts for her under-13 team on a rutted, sand-scarred field behind an elementary school.

Across town, the lush field in Milam Park sits empty.

Until the refugees began arriving, the mayor likes to say, Clarkston “was just a sleepy little town by the railroad tracks.” Since then, this town of 7,100 has become one of the most diverse communities in America. Clarkston High School now has students from more than 50 countries. The local mosque draws more than 800 to Friday prayers. There is a Hindu temple, and there are congregations of Vietnamese, Sudanese and Liberian Christians.

At the shopping center, American stores have been displaced by Vietnamese, Ethiopian and Eritrean restaurants and a halal butcher. The only hamburger joint in town, City Burger, is run by an Iraqi.

The transformation began in the late 1980s, when resettlement agencies, private groups that contract with the federal government, decided Clarkston was perfect for refugees to begin new lives. The town had an abundance of inexpensive apartments, vacated by middle-class whites who left for more affluent suburbs. It had public transportation; the town was the easternmost stop on the Atlanta rail system. And it was within commuting distance of downtown Atlanta's booming economy, offering new arrivals at least the prospect of employment.

At first the refugees — most from Southeast Asia — arrived so slowly that residents barely noticed. But as word got out about Clarkston's suitability, more agencies began placing refugees here. From 1996 to 2001, more than 19,000 refugees from around the world resettled in Georgia, many in Clarkston and surrounding DeKalb County, to the dismay of many long-time residents.

Many of those residents simply left. Others stayed but remained resentful, keeping score of the ways they thought the refugees were altering their lives. There were events that reinforced fears that Clarkston was becoming unsafe: a mentally ill Sudanese boy beheaded his 5-year-old cousin in their Clarkston apartment; a fire in a crowded apartment in town claimed the lives of four Liberian refugee children.

At a town meeting in 2003 meant to foster understanding between the refugees and residents, the first question, submitted on an index card, was, “What can we do to keep the refugees from coming to Clarkston?”

The United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants in Washington estimates that there are now more than 12 million refugees worldwide and more than 20 million people displaced within their own nations' borders. In 2005, only 80,800 were accepted by other nations for resettlement, according to the United Nations.

When Ms. Mufleh learned about the growing refugee community in Clarkston, she floated the idea of starting a soccer program. The Y.M.C.A. offered to back her with uniforms and equipment. So in the summer of 2004, Ms. Mufleh made fliers announcing tryouts in Arabic,

English, French and Vietnamese and distributed them around apartment complexes where the refugees lived.

For a coach hoping to build a soccer program in Clarkston, the biggest challenge was not finding talented players. There were plenty of those, boys who had learned the game in refugee camps in Africa and in parking lots around town. The difficulty was finding players who would show up.

Many of the players come from single-parent families, with mothers or fathers who work hours that do not sync with sports schedules. Few refugee families own cars. Players would have to be self-sufficient.

On a June afternoon, 23 boys showed up for the tryouts.

From the beginning, the players were wary. A local church offered a free basketball program for refugee children largely as a cover for missionary work. Others simply doubted that a woman could coach soccer.

“She’s a girl — she doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Ms. Mufleh overheard a Sudanese boy say at an early practice.

She ordered him to stand in the goal. As the team watched, she blasted a shot directly at the boy, who dove out of the way.

“Anybody else?” she asked.

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Ms. Mufleh made a point never to ask her players about their pasts. On the soccer field, she felt, refugees should leave that behind. Occasionally, though, a boy would reveal a horrific memory. One reported that he had been a child soldier. When she expressed frustration that a Liberian player tuned out during practice, another Liberian told her she didn’t understand: the boy had been forced by soldiers to shoot his best friend.

“It was learning to not react,” Ms. Mufleh said. “I just wanted to listen. How do you respond when a kid says, ‘I saw my dad shot in front of me’? I didn’t know.”

As a Jordanian in the Deep South, Ms. Mufleh identified in some ways with the refugees. A legal resident awaiting a green card, she often felt an outsider herself, and knew what it was like to be far from home. She also found she was needed. Her fluent Arabic and conversational French came in handy for players’ mothers who needed to translate a never-ending flow of government paperwork. Teachers learned to call her when her players’ parents could not be located. Families began to invite her to dinner, platters of rice and bowls of leafy African stews.

Upon hearing of the low wages the refugee women were earning, Ms. Mufleh thought she could do better. She started a house and office cleaning company called Fresh Start, to employ refugee

women. The starting salary is \$10 an hour, nearly double the minimum wage and more than the women were earning as maids in downtown hotels. She guarantees a 50-cent raise every year, and now employs six refugee women.

Ms. Mufleh said that when she started the soccer program, she was hopelessly naïve about how it would change her life.

“I thought I would coach twice a week and on weekends — like coaching other kids,” she said. “It’s 40 or 60 hours a week — coaching, finding jobs, taking people to the hospital. You start off on your own, and you suddenly have a family of 120.”

Ms. Mufleh is uncertain of her team’s prospects. She will have to teach the new players the basics of organized soccer. There are no throw-ins or corner kicks in the street game they have been playing. In her occasional moments of self-doubt, Ms. Mufleh asks herself: Can I really get these boys to play together? Can I really get them to win?

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Ms. Mufleh has a list of complaints about the Fugees’ practice field: little grass, no goals. Neighborhood children regularly wander through the scrimmages, disrupting play.

But after a gang shooting in an apartment complex behind the field in late September, she concludes that the field is not safe. She cancels practice for two days. Fed up, she storms into Mayor Swaney’s office, demanding use of the empty field in Milam Park.

When Lee Swaney first ran for City Council in Clarkston more than 15 years ago, he did so as an unabashed representative of “Old Clarkston” — Clarkston before the refugees. It was certainly the more politically viable stance. Because few of the refugees have been in the country long enough to become citizens and vote, political power resides with long-time residents. The 2005 election that gave Mr. Swaney a second four-year term as mayor of this town of 7,100 was determined by just 390 voters.

As mayor, Mr. Swaney has frequently found himself caught between these voters and the thousands of newcomers. But he has also taken potentially unpopular steps on behalf of the refugees. In 2006 he forced the resignation of the town’s long-time police chief, in part because of complaints from refugees that Clarkston police officers were harassing them. Mr. Swaney gave the new chief a mandate to purge the Police Department of rogue officers.

Within three months, the chief, a black man of Trinidadian descent named Tony J. Scipio, fired or accepted the resignations of one-third of the force.

Soccer is another matter. Mr. Swaney does not relish his reputation as the mayor who banned soccer. But he must please constituents who complain that refugees are overrunning the town’s parks and community center. Mr. Swaney encourages Ms. Mufleh to make her case at the next City Council meeting. So in early October she addresses a packed room at City Hall, explaining the team’s origins and purpose and promising to pick up trash in the park after practice.

Mr. Swaney takes the floor. He admits concerns about “grown soccer people” who might tear up the field. But these are kids, he says, and “kids are our future.” He announces his support of a six-month trial for the Fugees’ use of the field in Milam Park. The proposal passes unanimously. At least for six months, the Fugees can play on grass.

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On Dec. 26, Ms. Mufleh receives a fax on Town of Clarkston letterhead.

Effectively immediately, the fax informs her, the Fugees soccer team is no longer welcome to play at Milam Park. The city is handing the field to a youth sports coordinator who plans to run a youth baseball and football program.

Questioned by this reporter, Mayor Swaney says he has forgotten that in October the City Council gave the Fugees six months. A few days later, he tells Ms. Mufleh the team can stay through March.

In early January, Ms. Mufleh logs on to Google Earth, and scans satellite images of Clarkston. There are green patches on the campuses of Georgia Perimeter College, and at the Atlanta Area School for the Deaf, around the corner from City Hall. She hopes to find the Fugees a permanent home.