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The Courier-Journal

Bourbon, Baseball Bats And Now the Bantu

Louisville, Ky., Welcomes
Immigrants to Bolster
Its Shrinking Work Force

By MIRIAM JORDAN
Louisville, Ky.

IN 2003, MATTIE COX read about the arrival here of Hussein Issack and other refugees from Somalia's long-persecuted Bantu minority. Mr. Issack came from a subsistence-farming family and had never set foot in a factory. Nonetheless, Ms. Cox's first thought was to put him to work at the trailer maker where she is a human-resources manager.

"He was a man with kids who was new here and needed work," she says. Four years later, Mr. Issack is still working at Kentucky Trailer, having learned on the job how to use industrial tools to make doors for Allied Van Lines Inc. and other moving companies. "Today, he's multiskilled," Ms. Cox says.

Louisville's past was built on race horses, bourbon and baseball bats, but the city is staking its future on Somali Bantu and other immigrants flocking here from across the globe. As

neighbors like Nashville join a national wave of cities drafting ordinances designed to repel many foreigners, Louisville's business and political leadership is working aggressively to absorb immigrants.

In speeches, Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson champions the city's immigrants, whom he calls "internationals." In each of the past four years, he has handed out "international awards" to individuals, companies and organizations working to integrate and improve the lot of newcomers. "Communities that embrace diversity are going to be the most successful," says the mayor, who has been at the city's helm for most of the past two decades and avoids distinguishing between legal and illegal immigrants.

The powerful mayor hasn't faced much opposition to his strategy, but at his monthly community forums, some city residents have questioned whether his policy might be robbing Americans of jobs.

Louisville hasn't actively recruited the immigrants: Many of them are refugees who were randomly assigned here. Others ended up in Louisville because they heard that the housing was affordable and jobs were abundant. But

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Above, Volunteer Pam Greenwell greets the Issack family at Louisville International Airport Sept. 4.

Immigrants Prized by City

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among the new arrivals are many foreigners who first settled elsewhere in the U.S.

"It's not that the city has a 'let's go and find immigrants' approach," says Randy Capps, a senior research associate at the independent Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. "It hopes that by being a welcoming place, more immigrants will want to settle there."

There's a practical reason for the city's openness: Like many other U.S. cities, Louisville faces an aging population and falling birth rates that are shrinking its work force. United Parcel Service Inc., General Electric Co. and other major companies with operations in Louisville say they need immigrants to keep thriving.

"It's an economic imperative to attract immigrants at all levels, from factory workers to software engineers," says Omar Ayash, a Palestinian from Jordan who runs the city's Office of International Affairs.

Louisville isn't the only place eager to attract immigrants. But these towns are swimming against the tide. After the recent failure of the federal government to enact immigration reform, states and towns across the country have begun drafting their own laws to tackle illegal immigration. "Many states and local governments are getting back into the immigrant-bashing mode," says Mr. Capps, the immigration researcher.

Mayor Abramson figures that immigrants are more likely to contribute to the community if they're integrated into it. "You can engage these folks or you can wait to deal with the liabilities," he says. "What I am trying to do aggressively is ensure they become assets."

Louisville's approach has changed the composition of a 700,000-person city, which was once mainly white and African American. From 1990 to 2004, the city's foreign-born population jumped 388%—far above the 73% increase in the national average—as it absorbed thousands of Asians, Eastern Europeans, Africans fleeing persecution and Latin Americans in search of opportunity. Some 80 languages are spoken in its schools, and one apartment complex—"Ameri-

cana"—houses families from 42 countries.

All of the immigrant groups pose challenges, and perhaps none more than the Somali Bantu. While the overwhelming majority of Bantu men have jobs, their large families, illiteracy and limited skills can make self-sufficiency an elusive goal.

Historically, the Bantu in Somalia have been treated as second-class citizens by the country's lighter-skinned dominant clan. When civil war erupted in 1991, thousands of Bantu were enslaved, tortured and murdered. The lucky ones managed to flee to the relative safety of refugee camps in Kenya. The U.S. agreed to resettle about

A hive of Bantu-related activity, Arcadia relies on grants and volunteers to operate. In 2006, it got a \$25,000 grant from the Louisville Community Foundation, a local nonprofit, to fund Bantu cultural classes, after-school programs and a summer camp. In May, employees from GE, which makes appliances here, renovated the center with a \$5,000 grant from the company.

Charnley Conway, a vice president of human resources at UPS, which plans to add 5,000 jobs at its Louisville hub over the next three years, says investing in immigrants like the Bantu is vital. He adds that UPS has enlisted mentors to work alongside Bantu and other foreign employees struggling with English. The company funds English-language programs and the work of resettlement agencies, such as Catholic Charities, which help new immigrants.

Hussein Issack and his family—two children at the time, but now four—were among the first Bantu families to land in Louisville. Kentucky Trailer, which hired him, had already developed expertise in immigrant labor. The closely held firm had turned around its business by hiring Bosnians and Latin Americans in the late 1990s and translating its instruction and safety manuals into their languages.

The Somali Bantu, who speak Maay Maay, have no written language. So Mr. Issack learned through observation how to drive screws and rivets, use an electric saw and mount doors on trucks.

Despite everyone's efforts, the immigrant population is sometimes a financial burden on the city. A year ago, Mr. Issack moved into public housing because he couldn't afford a bigger apartment after his fourth child was born.

But Tim Barry, the director of the Louisville Metro Housing Authority, says he isn't concerned. "This is the sacrificial generation," says Mr. Barry, who is convinced the next Bantu generation will be better off.



Catholic Charities

Somali Bantu children in Louisville

13,500 Bantu, and starting in 2003, the refugees were scattered across the country, from upstate New York and Florida to Idaho and Oregon.

The first couple hundred Bantu arrived in Louisville in 2003 and 2004. But since then, the city has attracted hundreds more of the preliterate Muslim minority who were originally assigned to other U.S. cities. "People are nice, the rent is cheap and you don't need English to get a job," says Nahiyo Osman, a Bantu woman whose family moved to Louisville from Chicago six months ago.

"The Bantu have plenty of life skills. But they have to learn from scratch basic things that we take for granted," says Katie Carman, director of Arcadia Community Center, which is attached to a large apartment complex and offers Bantu children an array of free services.

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