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Talking about a more global Detroit: Model D Speaker Series in review

ASHLEY WOODS | TUESDAY, MAY 03, 2011



PANELISTS SEYDI SARR AND KAZI MIAH AT HAMTRAMCK PUBLIC LIBRARY

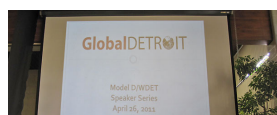
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They come seeking asylum or the chance to reunite with generations of family who left before. They come to earn college degrees or the opportunity to open a business. They come from Bangladesh, Poland, Senegal, Mexico, Iraq, and dozens of other countries.

Detroit has always been a city with multicultural dimensions, from historic immigrant bastions like French settlements along the riverfront, the old German near-East Side, West Side Irish neighborhoods that became Corktown and present-day Hamtramck and Southwest Detroit.

How we -- as a region, and as people -- welcome the world to our doorstep was the subject of impassioned debate at the Model D Speaker Series, called "Rolling Out the Welcome Mat: Detroit as a

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Global Community." About 75 people gathered at Hamtramck Public Library on Tuesday, April 26 for a panel discussion, co-sponsored by [WDET](#) and presented by Michigan State Housing Development Authority ([MSHDA](#)) and [City of Hamtramck DDA](#).

WDET reporter Martina Guzman, who hosted the discussion, noted that she, like many of the panelists, are the children of immigrants. "My experience is based on being the daughter of immigrants, and it's something that's profoundly affected my life," she said. Panelists included Steve Tobocman, Global Detroit; Maria Elena Rodriguez, Entrepreneur and Community Activist in Southwest Detroit; Dawud

Walid, Council on American-Islamic Relations; Hayg Oshagan, Director of [New Michigan Media](#) at Wayne State University; Nadia Tonova, National Network for Arab American Communities; Seydi Sarr, Artistic Director, Rowe Niodior African Dance Company; and Ryan Bates, Alliance for Immigrants Rights and Reform.

Seydi Sarr is the artistic director of the Rowe Niodior African Dance Company; a voice for Detroit's growing Senegalese community and an immigrant herself.



Her path to citizenship was one of confusion; a seven-year path documented by an endless amount of paperwork, lawyers fees and fingerprinting. "There are a lot of questions that you don't have direct answers for," she said. "We rely on each other, and everyone has a different story. There's no clear path."

That path can also be a fearful one. Many panelists echoed stories from

their communities of Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and the FBI. Home searches, detention stays and informants -- it sounds like something out of a movie, but to many immigrants here, that state-borne aggression is a fact of life. Listeners experienced a hard-hitting critique of federal immigration agents, and the impact vigorous policing has on multicultural communities. Ryan Bates directs the [Alliance for Immigrants Rights and Reform](#). For him, civil rights for immigrants are an essential component of the state's future economic development. "If you were an international businessman," he asked, "why would you bring your business to a city or state that has a reputation of being intolerant or openly hostile to immigrants?"

Nadia Tonova's idea? We need to actually be proactive about being welcoming. One way to do that is to create a center for new arrivals to the Detroit community, with advice on navigating the long process to achieving citizenship, social services, starting a business, and other essential information. "One hub,"

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she says, "where you could go and learn about all the resources that are available to immigrants." Pennsylvania, a state that's taken the initiative to create a welcoming center for its newest residents, coincidentally has had an 82 percent population increase in immigrants.

All these panelists, with their different homelands, ethnic backgrounds and wealth of experience, agreed on one core tenet -- given Detroit's population woes and the state's financial duress, halting the flow of newcomers to the region is disastrous policy. [Steve Tobocman is director of Global Detroit](#). He shared the results of his study on immigrant populations, which he conducted in 2010. Immigrants, he says, are three times as likely to start a business in Michigan as natural-born citizens. They are seven times as likely to file an international patent, and six times as likely to open a high-tech start-up firm. "Immigrants are essential," he said.

Hamtramck City Council's Kazi Miah agreed. He says we should realize what luck we have in welcoming immigrants from the world who come to our state, people brave enough to leave behind everything they know for the chance to make success in another land. "Those people are usually the risk-takers," said Miah, who came to Hamtramck from Bangladesh via New York. "Usually the small business owners are risk-takers. That's one reason I think a lot of immigrants are opening up businesses and being successful." And those concerned by immigrants taking away jobs from American citizens shouldn't forget the immigrant work ethic. "Yeah, they might take your job in the short time, but in the long run, they'll create five jobs for your kids and your grandkids. So be patient, and be welcoming."

Perhaps Tobocman summed it up best: "100 years ago, Detroit was about a third foreign-born, and it was the spirit of innovation that created the automobile and a number of industrial and manufacturing processes; that gave us a century of wealth and prosperity that maybe rivals any point of human history," he said. "It was the immigrant energy, entrepreneurship, technical skills and drive that made that happen."

"A pro-immigrant strategy," he said, "is about the most important thing we can do."

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Gary Schwartz · Director at University of Michigan School of Art & Design

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