

“Karen Wishner: The First American Face for Refugees”

By Juilia DiBease

Civil wars and internal struggles. Traumatic experiences, murder, and fleeing. These are the stories that Karin Wishner has become accustomed too in her everyday life. As the director of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) in Cleveland, Mrs. Wishner meets many new people from around the world, each one telling a different yet similar story. She is the first face that many of these people will see when they are relocated.

Since being appointed a director in 2006, Wishner has come across many changes to not only the people she helps but also the organization as a whole. Wishner has been working at the USCRI for 29 years now. She manages 8 full time, one part time, and 47 on-call staff as well as volunteers. She is responsible for overseeing and reporting on various programs at the agency. Wishner does outreach into the community by attending meetings, giving presentations, and building new partnerships. She is in contact with staff at the national headquarters regarding news from Washington, proposals for programs, and program development. She writes the proposals for resettlement, employment services, and intensive case management in order to receive funding for those programs.

After the introduction of Trump’s travel ban last year, Wishner and her committee took a hard hit. The president’s travel ban created fear in the community and among refugee populations. Family members were not able to be reunited with family living here. Agencies across the nation saw refugee arrival numbers drop and certain populations being banned from travel to the U.S. “Our community was affected because international college and university students were sometimes not able to finish their coursework and their degrees. Colleges and

universities saw a 30% drop in enrollments due to fewer international students coming to the U.S.,” says Wishner. There is often a ripple effect that becomes evident weeks or months after the initial event takes place, which makes it even more important to give careful thought to decisions. The solution to problems is not to build walls and barriers between people. People don’t leave their country on a whim. Crossing the southern U.S. border is treacherous and many people don’t survive. No one would do that unless they were very desperate and felt they had no other options. Crime and drug trafficking find their way into this country in ways that are more creative than through people that are walking hundred of miles to cross a border.

Along with the travel ban, refugees also have the added struggle of getting accustomed to a new life. Learning English is a struggle in many ways. First of all, it’s important for a job. Refugees cannot get employment and support their families without a basic knowledge of English. People need to communicate with others they meet, with doctors, with teachers and school staff where their children attend. Additionally, their children will most likely learn English faster than they do. This creates an imbalance in family structures and parents often also complain about their children losing a connection with their culture.

Wishner hopes that that people with a negative view of refugees and immigrants take the time to get to know them and that others will have opportunities to educate themselves on issues so that they can make informed decisions that affect future generations. “I believe that they would find that we are all more the same than we are different,” she says, “The strength of this country is the wealth of skills and knowledge in diverse communities and individuals”.