

# THE JOURNAL

# Made in Translation



Photo Illustration by RYAN GINES

## 'We are all immigrants'

### The history of immigration in St. Louis

By KRISTEN FARRAH  
Special Projects Editor

Zlatko Cosić faked his identity, escaped war and moved to St. Louis as a refugee by the age of 25.

Cosić, an adjunct professor at Webster University, said his case worker brought him to the wrong apartment his first night in St. Louis. When finally in his correct apartment, Cosić discovered his sparse accommodations.

"There was a bed, a table, two chairs and frozen chicken and milk in the refrigerator," Cosić said. "I mean there was nothing. It was a joke. It was worse than war. I always say it was worse than war."

Kristen Anderson said St. Louis has historically been a hub for immigrants and refugees. The International Institute of St. Louis resettled 23,508 refugees between 1979 and 2016.

Anderson studies immigration and St. Louis history. She is an associate professor of history, politics and international relations at Webster. She said immigrants found St. Louis extremely desirable in the 1800s, all the way into the 1900s.

"St. Louis has a reputation for being a welcoming city, that we're friendly Midwesterners," Anderson said.

#### Why St. Louis?

St. Louis provided easy access through its water transportation to the outside world, according to Anderson. Steamboats ran right up the Mississippi river, and immigrants from Eastern ports could take a train then ride down the Ohio river.

During the Civil War era, Anderson said St. Louis saw unusually high numbers of immigrants. By the 1860s, over half of the people in St. Louis were not born in America.

Lindsey Kingston studies forced migration and is an associate professor of international human rights at Webster. She said St. Louis is one of only a handful of cities in America where the U.S. government resettles refugees. The U.S. Department of State reported 190 communities across the country receive refugees through their Reception and Placement program.

"Despite some horrible misinformation that's out there on social media, resettled refugees really get almost no support from the government," Kingston said. "They are expected to be self sufficient and I think most refugees are hardworking and they want to make the best of it. But to be realistic, a lot of them don't have language skills yet."

#### Learning the language

Cosić studied German in school and never spoke English. The U.S. Embassy gave him a crash course in English before he left Belgrade, but Cosić said the simple grammar lessons did little to help.

"I remember we studied Suzanne Vega song lyrics," Cosić said. "We listened to ['My Name is Luka'] and tried to understand what she was singing about."

"If you have an idea, there are people that want to help you if you work hard."

Ramon Gallardo  
Immigrant business owner

Cosić moved to St. Louis without family connections or a sponsor to help guide him. With three weeks worth of food stamps and a bare apartment, Cosić leaned on the International Institute to help him with his English and job status.

Ramon Gallardo also did not speak English when he first arrived in Chicago, Ill. The 21-year-old from Mexico City found a cafeteria job. He said he was forced to learn English when he began working the counter.

"I remember one time this girl literally asked me out, and we could hardly communicate," Gallardo said, laughing at the memory. "She was the elevator operator. So we went out. That was the end of it because we couldn't talk."

#### Making St. Louis home

After World War II, Anderson said St. Louis became a less desir-

able destination for immigrants. Jobs disappeared due to industrialization and air travel gave immigrants more options to resettle.

"St. Louis starts to seem like someplace out in the middle of the country rather than a vibrant frontier town," Anderson said.

Gallardo moved from Chicago to St. Louis in 1959. He based his decision solely on what he saw from the inside of a bus. On his way to Chicago from Mexico, Gallardo looked out the window and said he had never seen anything so beautiful as St. Louis greenery.

Cosić needed to live in St. Louis for two years to get his Green Card and become a legal permanent resident of the U.S. After the two years, Cosić decided to make St. Louis his home. He met his wife and built up a local client base for his art career.

Although immigration numbers in St. Louis dropped after World War II, Kingston said the civil war in Yugoslavia brought tens of thousands of Bosnian refugees to St. Louis in the 1990s. Kingston said almost every class she has taught at Webster included students of Bosnian descent.

She said the strong Bosnian community in St. Louis exemplifies a successful integration of refugees who are primarily Muslim.

"With everything going on right now, this anti-Muslim rhetoric we're seeing, this is a clear example that Muslim refugees can and have integrated successfully into U.S. society," Kingston said.

#### Creating opportunity

Anderson said St. Louis needed immigrants to revitalize the city. She said they settled in low-populated areas and brought businesses and labor into those areas that were desperate.

Those areas, Anderson said, offered cheaper land prices and affordable housing. This offered more room for immigrants to start businesses.

Gallardo opened his Mexican restaurant, Casa Gallardo, in 1975 in St. Louis. He received a \$175,000 Small Business Association loan, the modern equivalent of nearly

## About the project

Special Projects Editor Kristen Farrah, Editor-in-Chief Emma Larson, Multimedia Editor Matt Woods and staff writers spent two months exploring immigration issues in St. Louis. Managing Editor Christine Tannous and News Editor Hanna Holthaus also covered the mental and physical health of migrants in Donna, Texas. Project members interviewed refugees, immigrants, attorneys, professors and business owners to see how immigration shaped St. Louis.



one million dollars.

Gallardo said he believes the immigrants who bring different skills and ideas to America are what makes the U.S. great.

Gallardo sold his restaurant to General Mills, Inc. within four years of its opening and became the president of Casa Gallardo. "[In America] if you have an idea, there are people that want to help you if you work hard," Gallardo said. "That only happens in the United States. I have traveled all over the world, literally. You name it, I've been there, and you don't see things like this."



CHRISTINE TANNOUS / The Journal

Ramon Gallardo holds his American Dream Award trophy.