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SAPIR VANGRUBER

DESTINATION REFUGE: A ONE-WAY TICKET

Author's Note: When asked to write this paper, I reflected back on my experiences working for Syracuse University Literacy Corps. My inspiration to describe different angles of a refugee's experience came from building mentoring relationships with refugee students within the Syracuse City School District. Working with the same group of students from 1st through 4th grade motivated me to share a glimpse of their journeys.

**Art & Design by
Benjamin Zender**

“Alic, who turns 30 today, was a teenager when the Serbs raided his neighborhood. His father did not want to flee. He took his wife, son and daughter away, fully intending to return within a few days. It was too late. The war soon consumed their house and neighborhood. The family had no choice except for leaving the country. Ten years ago, Alic was learning his first words of English through the refugee assistance program of the Syracuse city schools. Today, he has a master’s degree from SU, and he is a program manager of entrepreneurial practice at Whitman. He has also gotten underway with his larger dream. Over the past few years, Alic said, hundreds of families from Iraq, Somalia, Burma, and other nations have poured into Syracuse. Many settle on the North Side. Parents who were skilled professionals in their home countries lack the language or cultural comfort to find similar jobs here. They take any low-paying work they can get, which often forces them to leave their older children at home at night.”

--Sean Kirst

Despite facing constant struggle in his childhood during the Serbian invasion of Bosnia, Murad Alic’s refuge was a success when he came to Syracuse to start a new life. He represents the hope many refugees hold for the American dream when resettling in new environments throughout North America. After his family escaped from Bosnia and relocated to Syracuse, Murad Alic continued his childhood and had to assimilate into a new environment. Starting all over in Syracuse after fleeing the war in Bosnia, Alic and his family endured challenges faced by many refugees during their journey.

The success story of Alic’s resettlement in Syracuse is an example of how the long sought-after American dream can become reality with the right opportunities. However, is Alic’s experience an accurate representation of the refugee population? What factors shape this kind of atypical success in the resettlement experience of refugees? These stories present a challenge to outsiders in fully understanding all of

the road blocks and struggles refugees overcome in different situations. Learning English and obtaining an education from Syracuse University in Alic’s case demonstrates the success of overcoming academic, economic, and psychological challenges refugees are faced with.

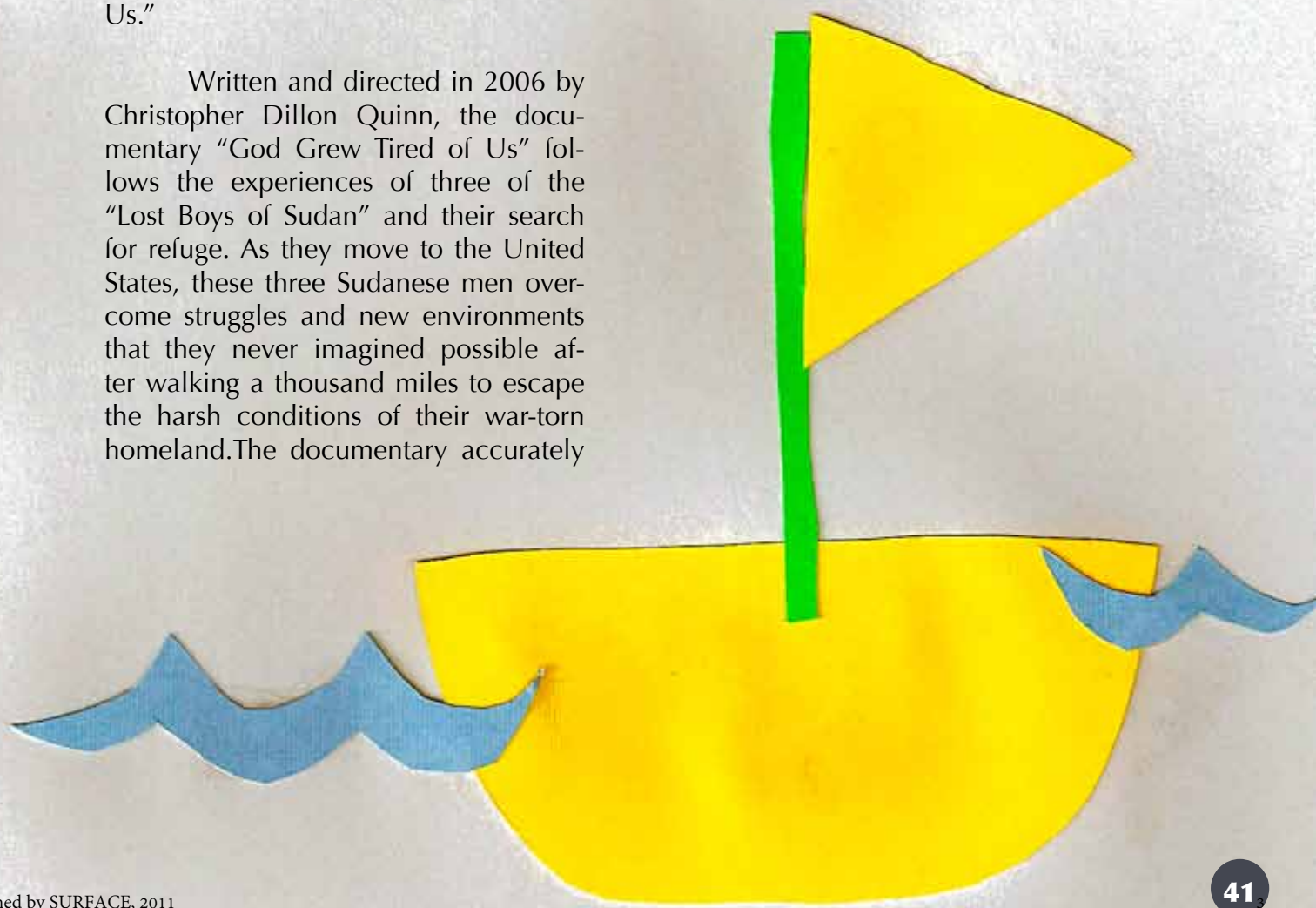
Vanessa Pupavac, a lecturer in International Relations at the University of Nottingham, introduces the term “sick role” in her article “Refugee Advocacy, Traumatic Representations and Political Disenchantment,” arguing that casting refugees in the ‘sick role’ compromises their rights (Pupavac 1). Pupavac develops the idea of describing the connotation of “sick role” in the case of the integration of immigrants, utilizing different scenarios that support her interpretation of this specific role immigrants undertake, which, according to Pupavac, is analogous to the presentation of refugees as a “double-edged sword” (Pupavac 5). Pupavac states, “the refugee may be offered greater protection in the sick role, receive welfare and be released from certain social obligations such as em-

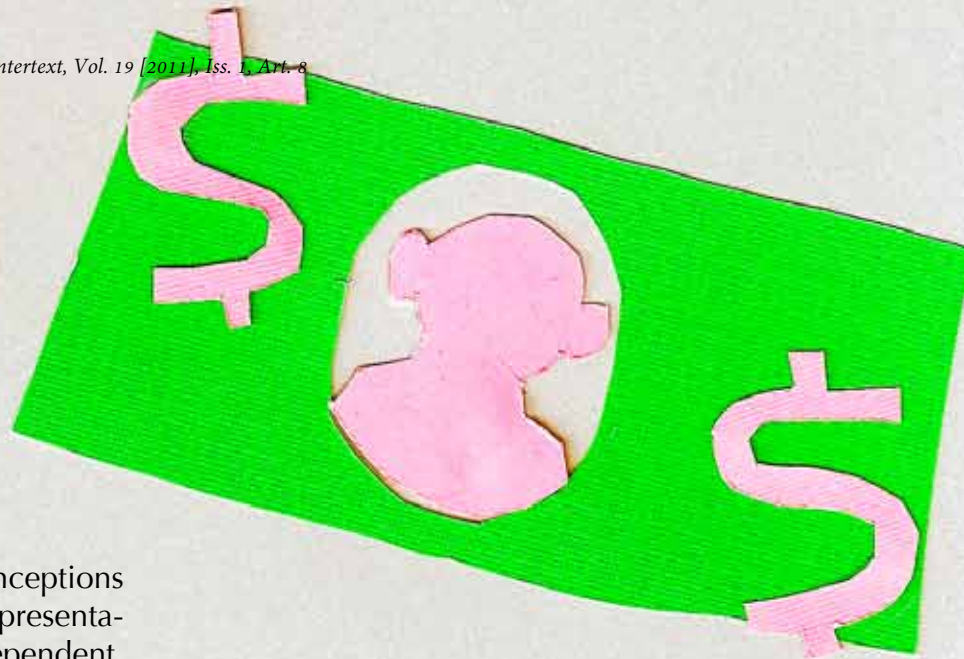
ployment, but the refugee accepts that his or her capacity is impaired and becomes an object of professional management” (Pupavac 5). Her interpretation of ‘protection’ is one from an outsider perspective in which the ‘sick role’ may actually compromise the roles and opportunities of refugees. Although they may be offered benefits and welfare from the government, the protection they receive financially only hinders their capability to discover better opportunities and better jobs rather than becoming subjected to a professional’s ‘management.’ They become limited in the types of jobs they can obtain or even apply for since they lack certain skills and are therefore placed in the category of ‘sick role.’ An example of this is the different scenarios in the documentary “God Grew Tired of Us.”

Written and directed in 2006 by Christopher Dillon Quinn, the documentary “God Grew Tired of Us” follows the experiences of three of the “Lost Boys of Sudan” and their search for refuge. As they move to the United States, these three Sudanese men overcome struggles and new environments that they never imagined possible after walking a thousand miles to escape the harsh conditions of their war-torn homeland. The documentary accurately

captures the conditions of their homeland in a manner that allows the viewer to fully grasp the drastic transition into their new environment. The resettlement of African refugees into Syracuse, New York was presented in a manner analogous to Pupavac’s ideas where the “sympathetic representation [of refugees] typically oscillates between portraying refugees as gifted or traumatized” (Pupavac 2). Common perceptions of refugees not possessing the ability to support themselves introduces consequences for them in a new environment, which only hinders them from gaining economic independence.

Categorizing refugees in a two dimensional scope of ‘gifted or trauma-





tized' actually generates misconceptions and provides a complicated representation of their capacity to be independent. For example, in the documentary there is a scene where the refugees are placed in an apartment and provided with government aid until they obtain proper jobs. Such representation casts them in a helpless light to the viewer and almost degrades their roles in society as the viewer watches them learn how to use kitchen appliances, wash the dishes, and use electricity.

As human beings, these immigrants are shown as not being capable of simple functions in the documentary, which eventually leads to the loss of their independence. Since they do not possess the skills to immediately become a part of the work force, these refugees must deal with overcoming economic challenges to support themselves as well as their families. The 'sick role' was further emphasized when they were physically placed in any available jobs that could generate some kind of support for them. Although this situation presents a benefit of being employed for the refugee's case and making the first step towards obtaining a salary, the placement of refugees in these jobs prevents them from exploring other options. Once the refugees were given a job in the documentary,

they thought of no other dream job they wanted, but quickly settled for what was given.

The resettlement of these refugees into specific communities also presents a problem closely correlated with the economic struggles. The case study discusses how "poverty also explains why many of these students and their families remain restricted to government-subsidized housing, often in rough, inner-city neighborhoods" (Kanu 9). The neighborhoods these refugees integrate into have serious issues described as "full of gangs" and "drug and prostitution activities" (Kanu 9). By placing these groups of immigrants into communities that lack the desired conditions, refugees don't seek the anticipated 'refuge' they may require. Moreover, while the refugees are being subsidized by the government and given aid in their process of integration, they are treated as a separate case and placed into communities that are already deprived of the resources and needs they require, creating an issue of environmental injustice.

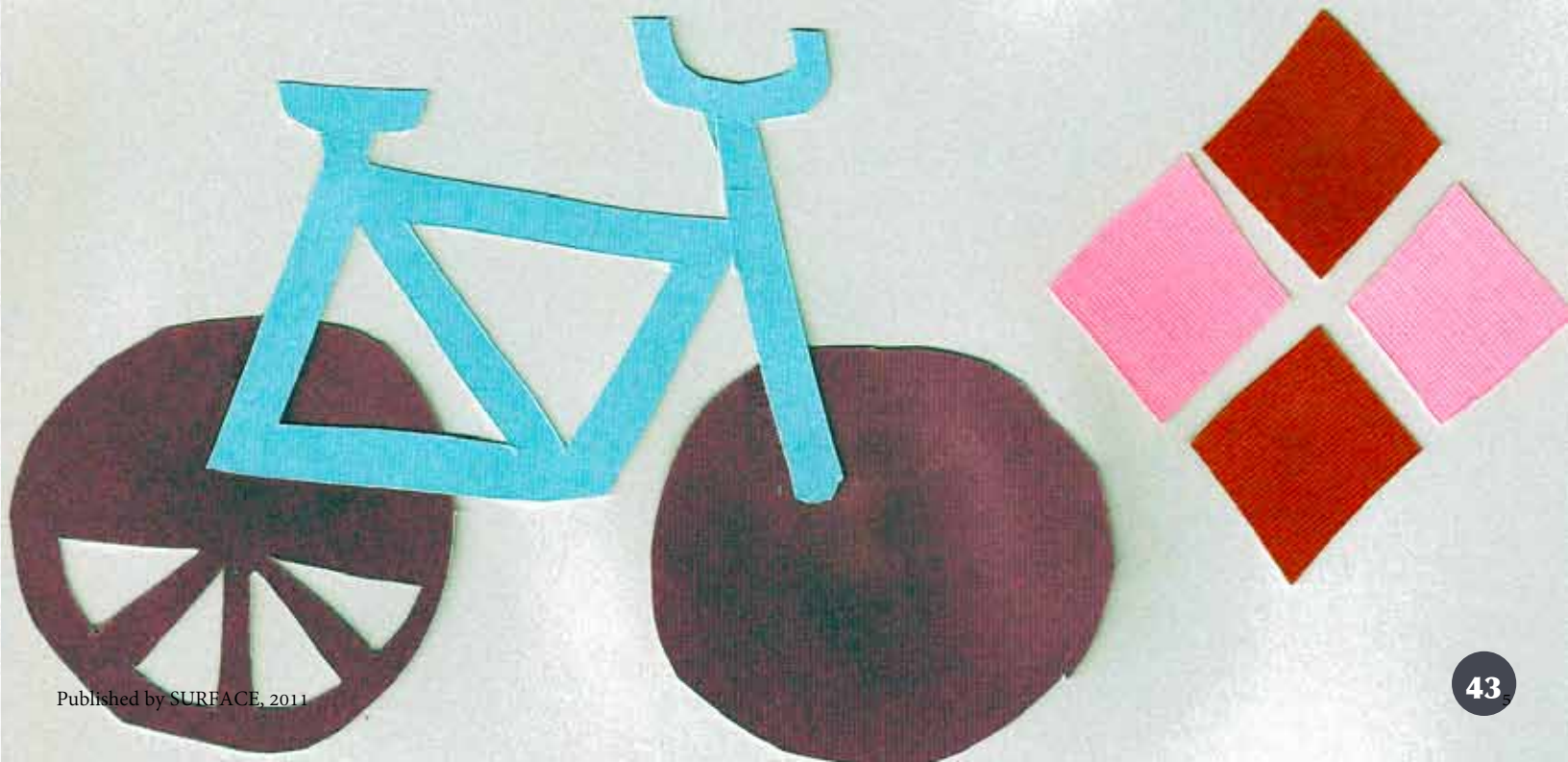
Their situation becomes further complicated when the neighborhoods

they are placed in don't offer as many opportunities as they need. Communities they integrate into "prey on innocent new arrivals like youth who have no firm support base and are looking for easy money and somewhere to belong" (Kanu 9). Many refugees can easily fall into this trap since they are eager to make money and help out their families, but their new placement in these neighborhoods makes them more susceptible to these conditions.

Upon arriving into these new communities after various methods of seeking refuge, the refugee population is anything but welcomed. The issue of environmental injustice provides a common thread as to why these incoming populations of refugees are placed in already depleted areas. Although there are economic reasons for their placement in these resource deprived neighborhoods, the refuge and needs of these immigrants continues to be unmet. A case study was conducted by the International Catho-

lic Migration Commission to investigate and address issues refugee populations face upon resettlement. After overcoming numerous struggles just to escape their homeland to be introduced into poor neighborhoods, the case study reported refugees "are more likely to end up in detention, to face discrimination, and racially motivated attacks, to be subject to deportation, and suffer from serious human rights abuses such as sexual violence and arbitrary arrest" (International 3). The barriers these incoming refugees face lead them to succumb to trouble in the neighborhood and further worsen the consequences of their integration. Their immediate surroundings full of gang and drug activity are the areas into which they they must learn to integrate, but certain challenges are inevitable when relocating these immigrant populations into neighborhoods.

The 'traumatized' view of the 'sick role' describes the misconception of refugees as targets of certain attacks,





with an overall helplessness of the situation without many efforts made to defend their conditions. An article written by Maureen Sieh in the Post Standard discusses the fears among refugees as a result of attacks and violence. Most attacks are not reported since “some refugees don’t call 911 because they speak little or no English and are afraid because of the persecution they experienced by law enforcement in their homelands and refugee camps” (Sieh 1). The ‘sick role’ becomes strengthened when there is a classification of refugees and the inability to speak English as mentioned in the article. The separation of refugees from other groups of people with similar backgrounds or socioeconomic classes represents the ‘sick role’ and the helplessness of their situations, indicating they are succumbed to these attacks since they cannot take much action to defend themselves. Unreported refugee attacks have become prevalent on Syracuse’s North Side with people “throw[ing] rocks at them, and refugee children say they sometimes are attacked when they get off the school bus or ride their bikes or skateboards. Refugees say they are afraid to walk the streets alone” (Sieh 1). Refugees face the analogy pro-

posed by Pupavac of the ‘double edged sword’ by facing rough living conditions where they do not feel safe as well as the relocation to a new environment where they are not wanted or welcomed. In a scenario that can only become worse, the community and families already native to the area do not want them there, which further complicates the ease of their integration.

Various case studies show that “U.S. cities are refusing to admit refugees, claiming that their resources and community will be drained...the town replied ‘that it was willing to accept not more than three or four families, saying that they feared the refugees would drain town resources’” (Refugees 1). From one environment to another, there are few changes that allow them to explore new opportunities and take a step forward to becoming independent and living their lives. However, the strong will of some cities to avoid the integration of refugees is present such as the example of the Massachusetts city of Holyoke, “which voted 14 to 1 to reject almost \$1 million in federal funds to settle 60 Somali families over the years” (Refugees 2). Even when there is money attached to

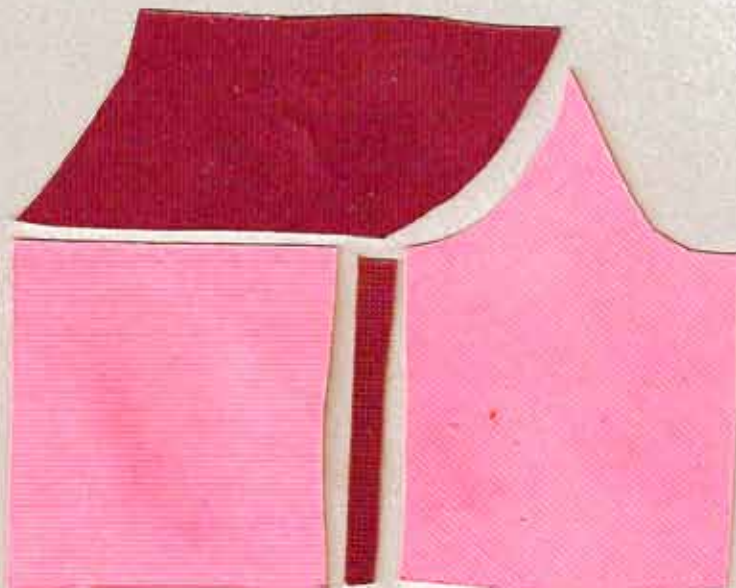
the settlement of refugees in a particular city, the people do not want them there since they fear many of their resources will be depleted. The selection of cities is determined by the government and agencies that help relocate refugees, but the acceptance of these refugees is in the hands of the individuals of these communities.

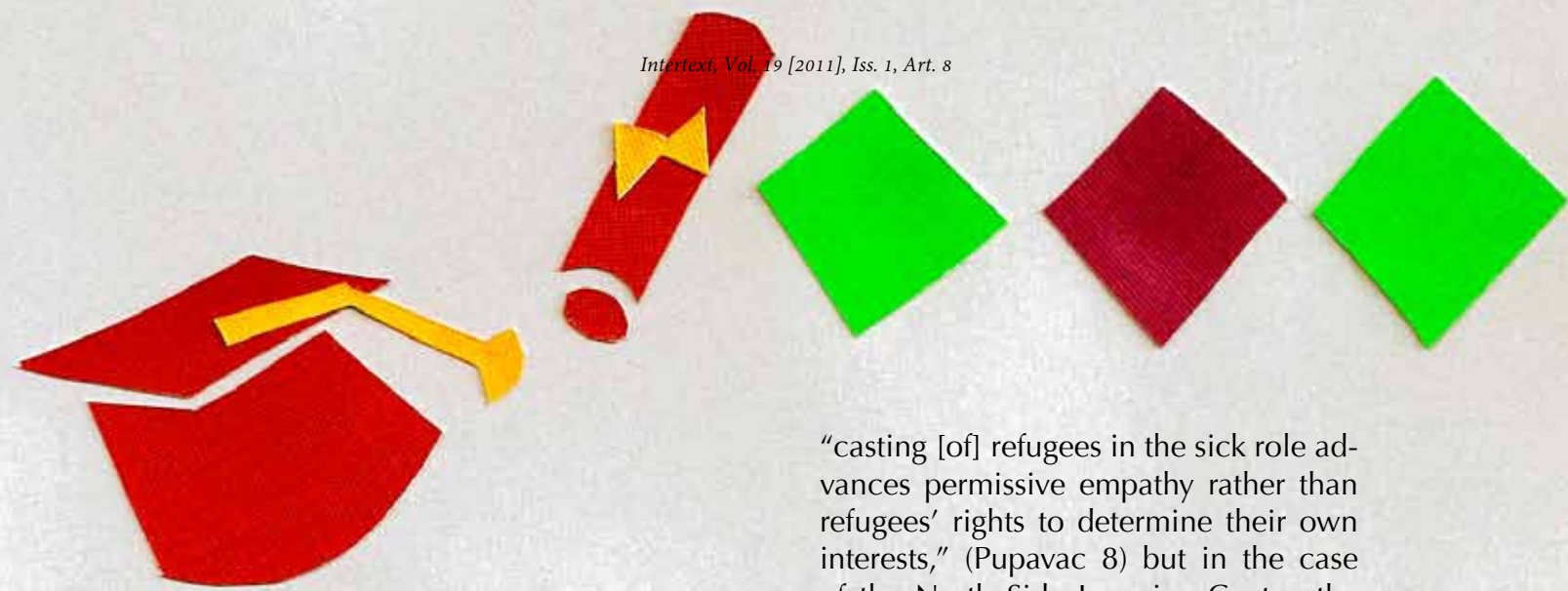
The placement of refugees in a community to live in and sustain themselves is an example of the 'sick role,' and certain opportunities in a given environment can help better the current situations of refugees by providing resources such as educational assistance. The North Side Learning Center is an educational facility run by volunteers in Syracuse that provides English learning classes to the local refugee population. Directed by Dr. Yusuf Soule and run by the tremendous efforts of multiple volunteers, the organization has experienced a successful enrollment rate, but certain environmental problems continue to persist. The common thread of the North Side community as stated by Dr. Soule is the need for English. This connects over 150 people that come every night to the learning center, with over 100 stu-

dents, 95% of them who primarily walk (Soule).

The specific focus on improving the education in the city of Syracuse has been matched by efforts and grants in easing the integration of refugees. Supporting the "socialization and integration of refugee children into their communities in which they located by helping to bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps," the grant of \$205,200 was awarded by the "State Office of Temporary Disability" (Syracuse 1). The funding provided to the Syracuse City School District demonstrates the efforts to help these children succeed in school and help them better adjust to these new environments. Cultural and linguistic gaps that exist between refugees and those who are already native to the environment can cause a potential challenge in adjusting more easily. The educational opportunities of these refugees are not only limited to children enrolled in schools, but also to adults through the North Side Learning Center.

Dr. Soule designed a program that reaches out to the Syracuse North Side community by offering several dif-





ferent levels of English classes. Dr. Soule along with volunteers from Literacy Corps and the Syracuse community donate their time to help teach English and offer better opportunities for the refugees locally (Soule). The Syracuse community has influenced the construction of the North Side Learning Center with the support of the community and the generosity of the Pavone family, as Dr. Soule mentioned. The Pavone family is a local Syracuse city example of a refugee family that came to the United States in hopes of the American dream and succeeded by starting their own pizza company. Their dedication to help the Syracuse community expand and reach out to offer English classes is “a choice they made to help without demanding anything in return,” said Dr. Soule. The North Side Learning Center facilitates the process of waiting lists for English classes that usually require four to five months of waiting.

The advancement of the North Side Learning Center has provided a “safe haven” as described by Dr. Soule for the local refugees and created a place for them to become a community together. According to Pupavac, the

“casting [of] refugees in the sick role advances permissive empathy rather than refugees’ rights to determine their own interests,” (Pupavac 8) but in the case of the North Side Learning Center, the ‘sick role’ of the refugees is shifted as well as Pupavac’s interpretation. The local refugees of the Syracuse community determine their own interests to advance educationally and learn English, rather than being traumatized and categorized as helpless. With the generosity and help of the community, the ‘sick role’ changes and allows for the expansion of opportunities.

The situations of refugees cannot fully be described or understood through different descriptions since there will always be a different lens of looking at the situation. The struggles refugees endure to overcome escaping their homelands in hopes of obtaining the American dream vary for each scenario or refugee case. Categorizing refugees in different roles or labeling them with different descriptions will never justify the obstacles they overcome everyday in the process of assimilation. The unique experiences and stories of refugees vary for each case and cannot be applicable to the refugee population as a whole, but the opportunities offered to help refugees can easily expand to aid in the integration into new environments.