

OpeningREMARKS

CONNECTING CULTURES

SEVERAL YEARS AGO IN GUANGZHOU, China, I walked into an office supply store looking for a mailing tube for a couple of art prints. I scoured the store and couldn't locate one, but what I did find was a cardboard tube packed with badminton shuttlecocks. I wondered for a moment if shuttlecocks were considered an office staple there and then thought, "Perfect. That will do the trick." I proceeded to the checkout counter with the shuttlecocks, but wanted to see if a clerk would sell me just the tube—or perhaps had a mailing tube stashed away somewhere that I'd overlooked.

One problem: My grasp of Mandarin consisted of two words and neither of the store clerks spoke English. "No problem," I thought. "I'll just gesture. They'll understand." Well, what I hoped would be an easy game of charades turned into an exasperating failure of communication. I smiled and gestured. They smiled back, bemused looks on their faces. The smile may have worked, but *universal* the gestures were not. Finally, a young Chinese customer approached me and asked in English if I needed help. Rescued! He translated my quandary and they nodded their heads, smiled, and handed me the tube, minus the shuttlecocks, free of charge. I thanked them

in one of my two Mandarin words and headed out the door, feeling like I'd just succeeded in crossing a huge cultural chasm.

I recalled this experience as I thought about the Somali Bantu refugees living in Syracuse who are featured in the article "Cultural Exchange." Torn from their homeland by violence, they must struggle not only with their past, but also with adapting to an entirely new and different world. Fortunately, through a folk arts initiative led by Felicia McMahon of the anthropology department, they've had some help with the transition. McMahon and her students have established a wonderful relationship with the Bantu community, one that is centered on helping the women preserve their traditional arts. But the relationship encompasses so much more. It is one of friendships, sharing languages and cultural traditions, learning from one another, and appreciating the value of bringing diverse communities together. The rewards of connecting across cultures can reach from the most modest of measures (shuttlecock container, anyone?) to truly immeasurable ones that show us how remarkably resilient the human spirit is.



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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE

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