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Stir It Up: Detroit institutions are helping the world's most vulnerable

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Things are getting tougher for refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants seeking entry to the United States. President Donald Trump ran a campaign that focused on hatred and distrust of immigrants (documented or no), and followed that up with two executive orders aimed at barring Muslims from entering the country. He's put a focus on criminal activity by immigrants.

Just last week news came out that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had advised U.S. diplomatic missions to identify "populations warranting increased scrutiny" as a step toward the extreme vetting of visa applications from that population.

And so the president moves forward with fulfilling his campaign promises with executive orders for things he told the American people were problems he could fix. Immigration to this country has been an issue since the first Europeans crashed the party. Those were the immigrants who should have been kept out. As we know they swept across the continent, killing the natives without mercy.

Trump and his associates see the same thing in today's newcomers, but the evidence does not back it up — at least not to the crisis level that has been sold to the public. A recently released Sentencing Project study concluded that immigrants "are less likely to commit crimes than native-born citizens." Another study from the libertarian Cato Institute concluded that "legal and illegal immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than natives."

So while it's true that some crimes are committed by immigrants, it's nowhere near the crisis that it's being made out to be. It's an injustice that has made the difficult tasks of aiding immigrant populations, refugees who would like to be immigrants, and asylum seekers even harder. And for mostly trumped-up reasons.

"The Trump administration has begun banning countries and constricting the presence of refugees," says Ismael Ahmed, a longtime activist working with refugee and immigrant populations. "Lots of people are concerned, including myself. ... People are forced to flee because of their religion, their political affiliations, or for their ethnicity, millions of them across the planet. It's destabilizing governments and becoming one of the greatest problems on Earth."

Cultural work has long been one of Ahmed's approaches to bring diverse peoples together. He's the main mover who brings us the Concert of Colors each year. In his discussions with others about what can be done to push back against the Trump agenda on immigrants, they came up with the idea of Rock for Refugees.

Hey, we're rocking in the free world. Let's make it work for our goals.

"It's not a new idea," Ahmed says. "We did it in Detroit 15 years ago when Congress was going to restrict the rights of refugees. Several of these are going on spontaneously across the country."

This is an outgrowth of the Take on Hate campaign that was launched across the country in 2014 by the National Network of Arab American Communities to challenge this country's growing prejudice and persistent misconception of Arab and Muslim Americans.

Rock for Refugees (from 2 p.m.-10 p.m. Sunday, April 2 at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, 313-582-2266) is shaping up to be a pretty diverse show — from DJ Spencer and the Jamaican Queens to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra Youth Jazz Ensemble, from the Foundation for Women in Hip-Hop to Casual Sweetheart. There are more, such as Grammy-winning Eminem associate Luis Resto's Luis & the Holy Fools, as well as Undesirable Aliens (with members of the Layabouts) and Detroit blues queen Thornetta Davis.

And it's not just musicians. Local artists have donated 40 pieces of work that will be sold in a silent auction that day, and the AANM will be open for guests. Money raised at the show is to benefit Take on Hate and Detroit's Freedom House.

"Freedom House is the only refugee center in Detroit, they do great work," Ahmed says.

Freedom House is a temporary home for indigent survivors of persecution around the world who are seeking asylum in the United States and Canada, according to their website.

"While they are working through the whole legal process we provide housing," Deborah Drennan, executive director of Freedom House, says. "Most of them are victims of torture and persecution. There's a lot of trauma and they need specialized services that other entities cannot provide without specialized training."

At any given time there are about 55 clients housed in Freedom House facilities and the programs are intensive. Depending on their needs they have access to medical care, English lessons, legal aid, vocational training, and more. It takes about two years to complete the process, but Drennan says that the group has a 94 percent success rate with exiting homelessness and into permanent housing.

"They come in and the proof is on them," Drennan says. "They have to demonstrate that they meet the definition of asylum seeker and that they have a legitimate claim. There are no services to them if they don't have a legitimate claim."

It takes refugees about two years to be vetted before entering the United States. Refugees already have the strictest background checks of any group entering the country, and once refugees are in

the United States they can seek asylum. The whole process can take years, and Trump's "extreme vetting" will tack on even more time.

As far as I'm concerned, extreme vetting is just looking for an excuse not to allow someone in. Which is not in the spirit of the words on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Fortunately there are plenty of people stepping up to resist the Trump agenda. This past weekend there was a march in support of immigrants in Ann Arbor. ACCESS in Dearborn continues its work with immigrants, and with the support of events like Rock for Refugees, the resistance will continue.

So let's keep rocking in the free world and let's keep fighting to make the world free.

The government Apprentice show on repealing and replacing Obamacare was an absolute circus last week. It was another attempt to fulfill a campaign promise without actually having to think about it. The president seemed a bit discombobulated when he couldn't fire Congress or the Freedom Caucus or somebody for mediocre performance. We've already seen *Apprentice*-like performance on the immigrant ban and now on health care, no matter how it turns out. Can somebody tell the president he's fired?

Meanwhile in Detroit the gentrification continues. We already knew that the Carr Center was moving from its Paradise Valley location because it can no longer afford its digs. Now we hear that the same thing is happening to the Heidelberg Project offices. That's two black cultural institutions that are moving because prices and speculation have upped the ante in downtown and Midtown. I like to see development, but I also like to see the Carr Center and the Heidelberg as part of a vibrant cultural mix. What'll be the next to go?