



# *The Cultural Fabric of Philadelphia*

**An Intimate Look at  
Philadelphia's Immigrant Communities**

**VOLUME TWO**

**Photography by Dave Lakatos**

**HAITIANS · JAMAICANS · LAO · MEXICANS · SIERRA LEONEANS**



ABOVE: A young Mexican boy in the midst of the color and pageantry of the El Carnivale de Pueblo parade. Processing down Washington Avenue to the Sacks Playground at the corner of 5th Street, this annual celebration of Mexican culture attracts a crowd of thousands.

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*This project was made possible through the support of  
The African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)—Voffee Jabateh, Founder and Executive Director  
and The Philadelphia Cultural Fund*



**HAITIANS · JAMAICANS · LAO · MEXICANS · SIERRA LEONEANS**





ABOVE: A Haitian-American woman celebrates the community's Flag Day with her child.

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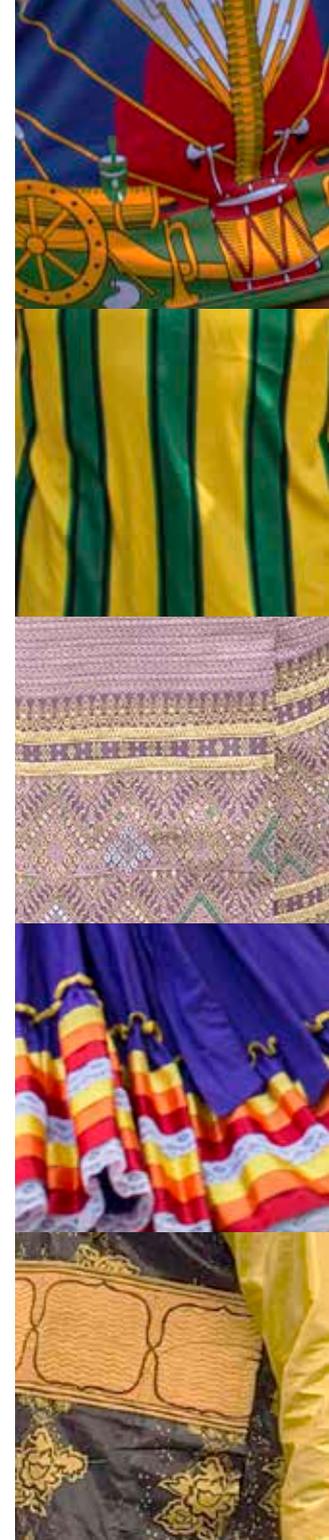
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Amy Eusebio, the Executive Director of the Philadelphia Office of Immigrant Affairs, is a first-generation Afro-Latina daughter of Dominican immigrants. Here Amy provides comments at a Mexican cultural event in Love Park.

# FOREWORD

Philadelphia is often referred to as a City of Neighborhoods. In Philly's neighborhoods, communities of many different cultures find ways to work together to create community and a better place for their families to live.

Immigrant communities contribute to Philadelphia in many ways, sharing their values and traditions, religious practices, food, music, and arts. These broaden and strengthen our communities. Their work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit also helps drive our local economy.

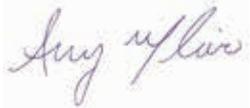
The City of Philadelphia also prides itself on being a World Heritage City and a Welcoming City, eager to create belonging and opportunity for all people who choose to call it home. From the first immigrants arriving to this region in 1682, to those that continue to join our community today, Philadelphia is better for its diversity and inclusiveness.

In 2019, Philadelphia residents voted in favor of creating a permanent Office of Immigrant Affairs in the municipal government charged with the mission to improve the well being of immigrants, refugees, and asylees in our city. I am proud to lead this office and its work to sustain immigrant integration especially in such a critical time in our city, nation, and world.

*The Cultural Fabric of Philadelphia* photo book project provides individual book volumes that give the reader an intimate look at immigrant contributions to the cultural and economic development of our great City. More importantly, this ongoing photo book project illustrates the commitment of these immigrant communities to our city and will provide all of us with a unique opportunity to see the world from one another's point of view.

I hope you enjoy it!

Sincerely,



Amy Eusebio

Executive Director, Office of Immigrant Affairs

City of Philadelphia





# INTRODUCTION

Immigrants and their communities have been experiencing challenging times recently. Anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise in the U.S and around the world. Discrimination robs a city of the rich diversity that immigrant neighborhoods provide.

Some important facts about Philadelphia's immigrant communities:

- Nearly 1 in 5 Philadelphians in the labor force in 2016 was an immigrant. They worked in service jobs in health care, education, hospitality, and retail sectors. The number of immigrants in the labor force grew by 66,000 from 2000 to 2016. This was more than double the increase in U.S.-born workers over the same period.
- Immigrants' median household income was about \$39,700, close to that of U.S.-born Philadelphians. The poverty rate among immigrants was 24 percent, slightly below the rate for native Philadelphians.
- About 3 in 10 adult immigrants had college degrees, a slightly higher share than for U.S.-born residents.
- From 2000 to 2016, the fastest-growing groups of foreign-born Philadelphians came from Africa, Asia and the Americas—the latter mostly from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The purpose of the *Cultural Fabric of Philadelphia* photo book project is two-fold:

1. Prepare “coffee-table” quality photo books that tell Philly’s immigrant community stories.
2. Help boost community members’ mental health through engagement in the book-building process, which engenders a sense of community pride, self-respect and empowerment.

The overall goal of the *Cultural Fabric of Philadelphia* program is to increase the understanding and awareness of Philly’s immigrant communities—in all Philadelphians.

LEFT: After prayer services, many step outside the mosque to shop for goods—from fabrics to fruit—at small tables set up by women of the community. Sierra Leoneans and members of many other African communities attend this multicultural institution at 63rd Street and Grays Avenue. Its imam, Mohammed Jomandy, has always preached diversity and inclusiveness.





# ABOUT THE BOOK TEAM

The cultural stories in this photo book were found through the direct help and guidance of the following committed and passionate community leaders.

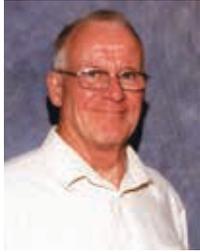
## COMMUNITY LEADERS

- Haitian Community:* **Beatrice Rolland**, DBA, CPA; **Numa St. Louis**, MA; District Representative and Policy Advisor, U.S. House of Representatives
- Jamaican Community:* **Dennis Hinkson (Gabby Giffords)**, professional photographer; **Blane Stoddard**, President and CEO, BFW Construction Project Managers; **Christopher Chaplin**, Honorary Consul of Jamaica in Philadelphia
- Laotian Community:* **Foxy Sidhara**, owner, Vientiane Café; **Sunny Sidhara**, owner, Vientiane Bistro; **Vickie Kham**, Secretary/Social Media Director, Chew Street Lao Buddhist Temple
- Mexican Community:* **Ivette Compean**, Managing Director, Mexican Cultural Center; **Olga Rentara**, Executive Assistant at Philatinos Media; **Edgar Ramirez**, Founder and CEO, Philatinos Media; Board Member-Puentes de Salud; **Cesar Viveros-Herrera**, multidisciplinary artist, muralist and community liaison
- Sierra Leonean Community:* **Foday Turay**, community organizer and soccer coach; **Abu Saccoh**, community organizer; **Musu Kamara**, Queen of Culture

Special recognition should also be given to the Philadelphia Office of Immigrant Affairs for their support.

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*In remembrance of Dr. Dante Sanchez: mental health professional, North Philly mental health clinic founder and tireless advocate for the Latino communities in the City. Dante was also a major contributor to Volume I.*



## **ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVE LAKATOS**

With formal studies and training starting in the early 1990s, Dave started building on his passion for documentary-type “storytelling” photography. Dave formed LifeWork Photo, a nonprofit organization, in 2018 with a vision and mission of using photography to support social causes. LifeWork Photo takes on projects that result in the betterment of communities and the lives of the people that live in them. To see more of Dave’s photography work, visit [www.lifeworkphoto.org](http://www.lifeworkphoto.org).

## **PROJECT GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT: VOFFEE JABATEH**

Liberian-born Voffee Jabateh is the founder of and has served as CEO and Executive Director of the African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA) since 2001. He moved to Philadelphia during the Liberian civil war in 1990. A seasoned community leader and organizer, Voffee has played an instrumental role in the founding of other important African organizations in Philadelphia, including the Mayor’s Commission on African and Caribbean Affairs, the Coalition of African and Caribbean Communities in Philadelphia (AFRICOM) and the African Family Health Organization (AFAHO). He also helped reorganize the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania.

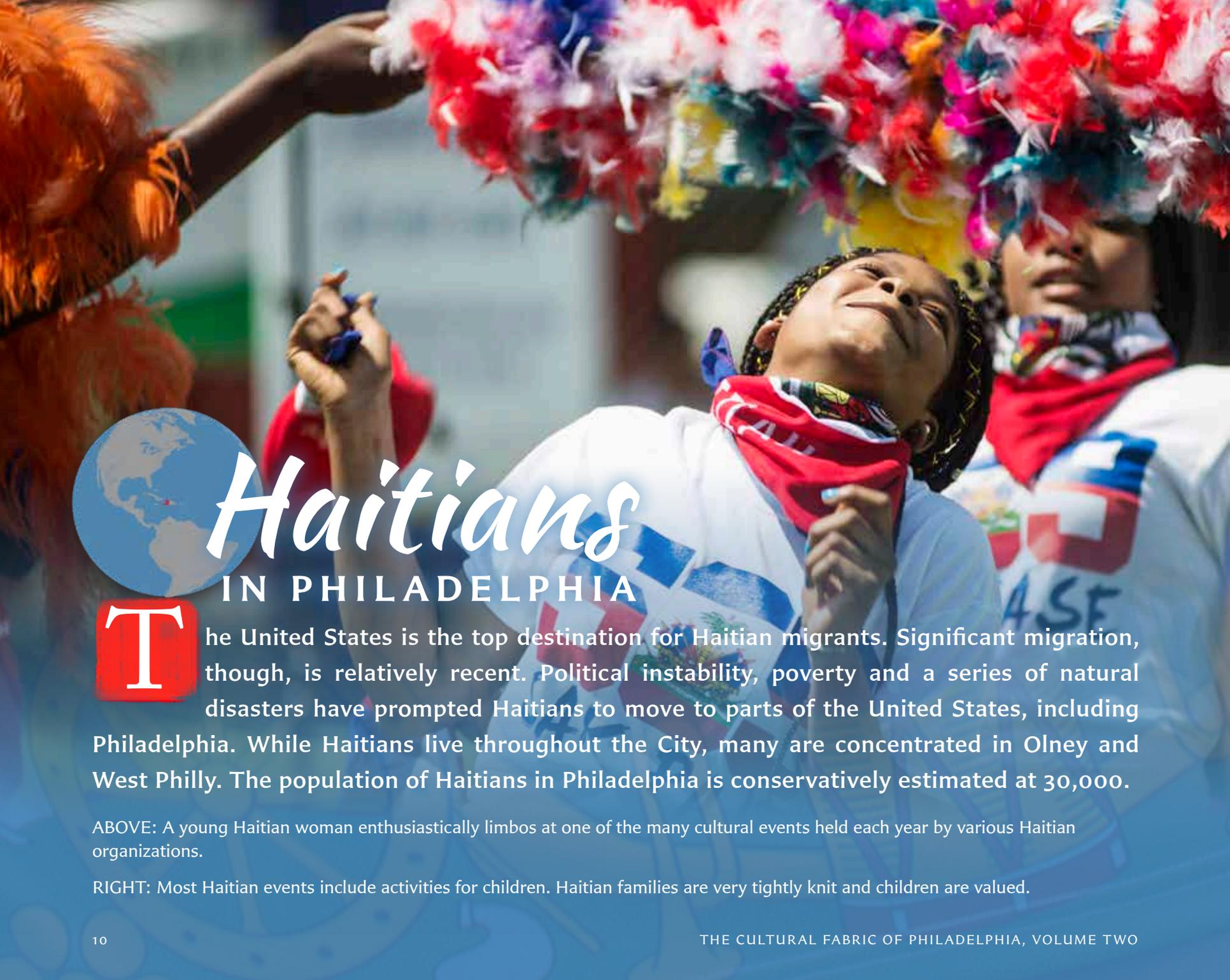
## **ABOUT THE DESIGNER: KATHRINE FORSTER KUO**

Kat Kuo has cheerfully provided freelance graphic design and illustration to clients nationwide since 1999. She seeks joy in both work and life and often finds it in color, food, and people, all of which combined to make the process of designing these books terrific fun. You can explore Kat’s design work at [facebook.com/katkuo.design](https://facebook.com/katkuo.design).

## **ABOUT THE SPANISH TRANSLATOR: ODILIA RIVERA-SANTOS**

Odilia Rivera-Santos is an AfroPuerto Rican poet and translator born in Puerto Rico. Her fiction, poetry, and nonfiction have appeared in numerous journals. She studied literature and writing at Smith College. She’s a humble genius who loves people.





# Haitians

## IN PHILADELPHIA



The United States is the top destination for Haitian migrants. Significant migration, though, is relatively recent. Political instability, poverty and a series of natural disasters have prompted Haitians to move to parts of the United States, including Philadelphia. While Haitians live throughout the City, many are concentrated in Olney and West Philly. The population of Haitians in Philadelphia is conservatively estimated at 30,000.

ABOVE: A young Haitian woman enthusiastically limbos at one of the many cultural events held each year by various Haitian organizations.

RIGHT: Most Haitian events include activities for children. Haitian families are very tightly knit and children are valued.





LEFT: Haitian pride is on full display at the Flag Day festival, held in Philadelphia on the third weekend of every May. Commemorating the creation of the Haitian flag in 1803, Flag Day is a public holiday in Haiti.

ABOVE: A participant at the annual Haitian Flag Day festival illustrates both his pride for his native home, Haiti, but also for his new home here in the US with the flag on his cap.



The colorful Haitian flag is an important anchor for community cohesion.



Music and dance are an integral part of Haitian culture. Here two young girls perform at an annual Independence Day Festival held at a City recreation center. These events provide the Haitian community the opportunity to come together, talk, laugh, network and, of course, sing and dance.



Within a very short period of time, the island of Haiti was hit with a large hurricane (September 2017) and a magnitude 7.2 earthquake (August 2021). As one of the poorest countries in the world, it was in dire need of help from as many sources as possible, and many countries, including the U.S., supplied aid. Here members of the Haitian Coalition of Philadelphia pose at a “fill the container” event in support of those affected by these disasters.





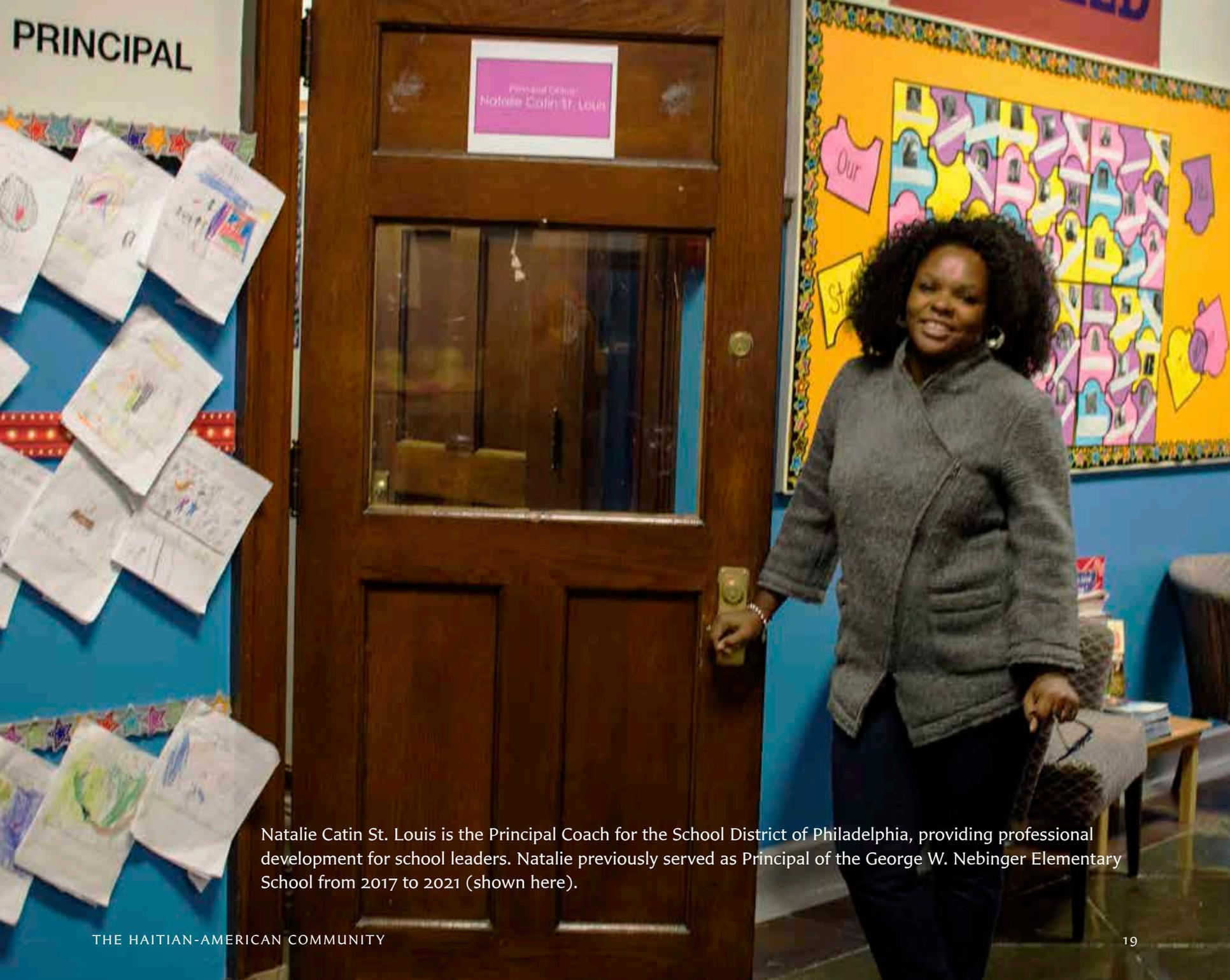
LEFT: The Haitian Catholic Community in Philadelphia started in 1976 with a small prayer group holding a monthly mass in their traditional language, Haitian Creole. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia supports this community at churches in Philadelphia (St. William Church) and in Lansdowne (St. Barbara Church) by providing a Haitian priest. Since 2018, this has been Rev. Père Eugène R Almonor, OMI.

ABOVE: The choir at a Catholic Mass in Creole at St. Barbara Church.



There are many Haitian professionals in the City—in medicine, business, arts, government and more. Many have attended Philly universities and stayed in the professional workforce here.

Yves Anty came to the U.S. in 1984 from Port-au-Prince and studied multiple disciplines at Temple. He worked in the communication and financial fields prior to starting his own consulting business.



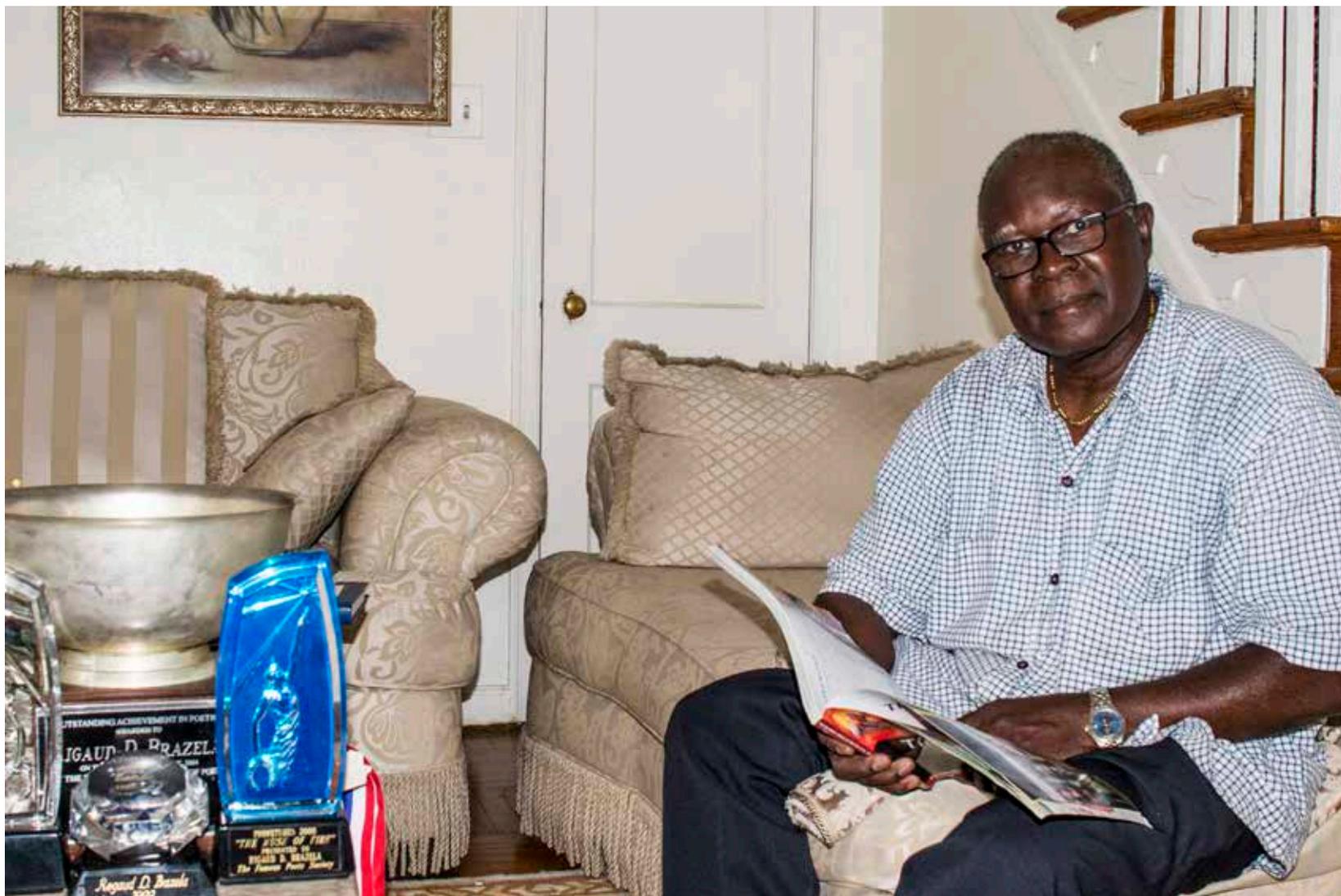
PRINCIPAL

Principal Coach:  
Natalie Catin St. Louis

Natalie Catin St. Louis is the Principal Coach for the School District of Philadelphia, providing professional development for school leaders. Natalie previously served as Principal of the George W. Nebinger Elementary School from 2017 to 2021 (shown here).



Wilfred Gabriel came to the U.S. in 1985, at a time of upheaval in Haiti under President Jean-Claude Devalier. While working in different jobs for almost 20 years, he would make traditional Haitian food and share it with his workmates. Around 2001, Wilfred decided to take the risk and open a restaurant. His Fritay Lakay business is one of the only traditional Haitian restaurants to serve meals in a sit-down atmosphere.



Rigaud Brazela is an award-winning Haitian poet. He learned poetry from his grandmother on the island, and he now carries that legacy forward as he teaches younger people about shaping words for their own expression.





ABOVE: A pick-up soccer match at the Flag Day festival.

LEFT: Colorful feathered costumes enliven the annual Haitian New Year's Day festival.



# Jamaicans

## IN PHILADELPHIA

**J**amaica lies in the western Caribbean Sea, south of Cuba. The original inhabitants of Jamaica are believed to have arrived in about the year 800, likely coming from South America. Jamaica was colonized by the Spanish, then the English; on August 6, 1962, Jamaica gained its independence. In 1962, Jamaicans drafted their own constitution, which guarantees the freedom, rights and privileges of every citizen.

Jamaicans comprise the largest percentage of U.S. immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean. The 1990 U.S. census placed the number of documented Jamaican-Americans in the USA at over 435,000, about 33,000 of whom reside in the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metropolitan statistical area (MSA). Approximately 10,100 live in Philadelphia.

RIGHT: Chris Chaplin, the Jamaican Honorary Consul in Philadelphia, receives an honorary citation from City Representative Sheila Hess at a 2022 Jamaican Flag Raising event at City Hall.

LEFT, AT BOTTOM: In Jamaica, people often come together in a local park after Sunday church. Philly's Jamaican community continues this tradition at Belmont Grove in the Belmont Plateau area. Over 100 people attend this gathering, where many Jamaican delicacies and goods can be found at tents and tables.





LEFT: The Penn Relays is the oldest and largest track and field competition in the United States, hosted annually since April 21, 1895 by the University of Pennsylvania at Franklin Field in Philadelphia. More athletes run in the Penn Relays than at any other track and field meet in the world. It regularly attracts more than 15,000 participants from high schools, colleges, and track clubs throughout North America and abroad, notably Jamaica, competing in more than 300 events over five days.

BELOW: Team Jamaica Bickel (TJB) was formed in 1994 and is the leading organization providing services for Caribbean athletes who compete in the Penn Relays. TJB provides daily meals and refreshments (as shown here), physical therapy, airport transportation and hotels.







ABOVE: Blane Stoddard (at podium), President of BFW Construction and Project Managers, is an active supporter of the Jamaican community in Philadelphia. He organizes community events and serves as National President of the Young Caribbean Professionals Network (YCPN). YCPN includes Jamaican-Philadelphian professionals in a variety of fields.

LEFT: This picnic, organized by the YCPN, gave members an opportunity to relax and build both personal and business relationships.



Dennis Hinkson (a.k.a. Gabby Goldfinger) is a professional photographer and the unofficial photographer for the Jamaican community in Philadelphia.



Tanieka Auld, in back, came to the U.S. from Jamaica over 30 years ago. At home on the island, she explains that her family was always cooking, for family, friends, or neighbors. Naturally, once she came to America, she continued to do so. In 2014, she started the Quality Taste Restaurant on Lancaster Avenue at 40th Street.



It's always busy at Jamaican D's restaurant in the West Oak Lane section of the City. They also sell from a food truck, which allows them to bring Jamaican food to other neighborhoods.



Howard Foreman (standing, hands folded) came to the U.S. roughly 30 years ago. He was a chef at home on the Island. Approximately 18 years ago, Howard started his restaurant business, Mr. Jerk King Caribbean Feast. He now has one “brick and mortar” location (Rising Sun Avenue), plus four food trucks like the one in this photo.



The West Philadelphia Seventh Day Adventist Church is one of many Jamaican Protestant churches in the City. Most Jamaican-Americans are Protestant, as are over 60% of Jamaicans on the island.



A major, long-term church community in Philadelphia is the New Testament Church of God in Southwest Philly. This church was started in 1975 under the leadership of Reverend Felix Poyser and Sister Lilith Poyser. Pastor Felix Poyser passed in 2022 at the age of 93, and his son, Stephen Poyser, has stepped into his father's position.



ABOVE: Soccer is a keen interest for most of Philly's immigrant communities, including Jamaicans (their 2022 team is pictured above). This enthusiasm has fed the overwhelming success of the Unity Cup International Soccer Tournament. Each community is permitted to field a team for this competition. It started with 30-some teams in 2016 and by 2022, over 60 teams were participating.

RIGHT: A member of the Unity Cup Jamaican team defends the ball from an oncoming player.





# Lao

## IN PHILADELPHIA

**L**aos has existed since the 14th century. Much of this time, though, has seen conflict, colonialism, and occupation by other countries. The modern nation-state of Laos emerged as an independent country in 1953.

Shortly after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam, a cease-fire existed between the communist Pathet Lao and the Laotian government. The Pathet Lao, however, remained little more than a proxy army for Vietnamese interests. When South Vietnam fell to communist forces in April 1975, the Pathet Lao, with the backing of North Vietnam, were able to take total power in Laos. In December 1975, the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic was established. An internal civil war in Laos followed the end of the Vietnam War. Around 300,000 people—out of a total population of three million—left Laos by crossing the border into Thailand. Many of these Lao refugees were allowed entry into the U.S. A smaller number of Lao refugees settled in Philadelphia than in other American cities, but the total here still numbered in the low thousands.



Many Southeast Asian refugees escaped conflict and genocide in their homelands. When they came to the U.S., they often encountered resistance and discrimination. FDR Park became their green space sanctuary and meeting place, familiar and inviting to refugees missing their verdant homeland. This led to the start of the Southeast Asian Market at FDR Park, seen here.



As Southeast Asians gathered as a community in FDR Park, a Lao lady started making papaya salad out of her van and her husband grilled under a tree. By the early 1990s, a small handful of Cambodian and Lao vendors began popping up with their own delicious dishes, and word spread of a place in the park to enjoy traditional Southeast Asian food. With the help of the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia and relationship-building among fellow community leaders, park and city agencies agreed to allow the Southeast Asian Market at FDR Park to become an official Philly cultural feature.



Sanjohn (in the red hat) started playing tennis with Lao friends in FDR park on the weekends. 21 years later, he's still playing every weekend, but with over 30 other Lao players.



Khamlu Kayyarth came to the U.S. and Philadelphia following the turmoil in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. Seeing that there were very few places to get Lao food and household items in the City, he started his own store on South 7th Street in 1987. As he says, he didn't want to work for others, so he did it himself.



Senthong Sananikone came to the U.S. in 1981, also because of post-Vietnam War unrest. A hair stylist by trade, she went to school in Philadelphia and got her license to continue that work in her new home. She started her own salon on South 7th Street in South Philly in 1986. Now both her daughter (Sandy) and her grandson (Derick), shown here at left, are hair stylists there.





LEFT: A traditional Lao meal, Sai Gawk (Lao Sausages), here consists of sausages stuffed with chopped pork, lemongrass, and kaffir lime leaves, served with cabbage salad, spicy roasted chili garlic sauce and sticky rice.

RIGHT: Sunny Phanthavong learned to cook Lao cuisine at Vientiane Café, on Baltimore Avenue in West Philly. Sunny's mother, Chef Daovy Phanthavong, along with her husband Phoxay Sidara, started the Café in 2002, following years of working from their home kitchen. After years of learning alongside her mother, Sunny opened her own restaurant in 2018—Vientiane Bistro, on Kensington Avenue.





LEFT: Participants at a prayer service at the Chew Street Lao Buddhist Temple place gifts for the monks (alms) in the plates and urns on the table. Giving alms (thuk baht) is an important part of Lao culture. Almsgiving supports the monks at the Temple, who are not allowed to work or earn money that would be needed to support themselves. The alms can be either money or food items, as can be seen on the table here.

BELOW: Monks at the Chew Street Lao Buddhist Temple lead a prayer after almsgiving. The fire is from a candle dripping wax into an urn with water that then becomes a holy water sprinkled on the participants. The string is stretched through the hands of not only the monks, but all those attending the service, and it represents a connection to the participants' ancestors.





Abbot Onla ties a white cotton string of blessing onto the wrist of a participant at a recent ceremony at the Chew Street Lao Buddhist Temple. A supplicant requests this of the monk because it is believed to provide blessings, guidance and good health.



This is a traditional Lao Buddhist Afterlife Celebration, held 100 days after a person's death. It is believed that after 100 days, the person crosses over into a new, reincarnated life. The altar that has been constructed in the back right corner holds a photo of the person, along with items that may be useful in the afterlife. There are also several "money trees" (right rear, with lights) to which the guests attach cash for the deceased's use. The two monks lead the service of prayers and chanting.



ABOVE: Lao New Year is celebrated April 13-16 in America; in Laos, the festivities can last weeks or even months. An important part of the Lao New Year Celebration is the traditional Lao New Year Pageant known as “Nang Sang Khan.” Young women wear traditional Lao clothing, accessories and hairstyles. Several young men are selected to escort the pageant contestants.

RIGHT: Chloe V. is a talented young Lao traditional dancer, following in the footsteps of her mother, aunts and uncle. Here Chloe performs a routine for the 2022 Lao New Year Celebration at the Chew Street Temple.





LEFT: Vicki Khamphoumy-Sundara (Vicki Kham), an American-born Lao, is the Secretary and social media director for the Chew Street Lao Buddhist temple. Vicki's great-uncle, Bounlieng, was a founding member of this temple. One of her roles for the Temple Committee is to try to attract young Laos back to the Temple, as well as preserve Lao cultural practices for future generations.

ABOVE: A young, mixed crowd at a recent Lao New Year event at the Temple on Chew Street in the Northeast. The two temples that serve the Lao community, on Chew Street and Washington Avenue at 20th Street, serve as spiritual and social gathering places.



Phay Sundara (on keyboards) is part of the Lao band Sai Nam Ngurm. Tom Maokhamphiou (front) is shown here playing a traditional Lao guitar called a Phin. It is rare to find someone of Tom's skill with this instrument in the U.S., let alone Philly.



# Mexicans

## IN PHILADELPHIA

**M**exican immigrants first arrived in Philadelphia in the late 19th century, and the flow continued into the early 20th century. They worked in the construction and agricultural industries. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Mexican families came to Philadelphia from Mexico and New York City. They worked in the service industry and began opening businesses around the city. These more recent immigrants have established an enclave in South Philly, adding to the area's cultural mix. The 2010 U.S. Census documented over 15,000 Mexican immigrants in the City of Philadelphia.

FAR LEFT: A couple in traditional Mexican attire participates in El Carnivale de Pueblo, held at the playground at 5th and Washington Streets every year.

RIGHT: A Mexican man shows his pride for his country, its flag and its culture at the annual Mexican Independence Day celebration held at Penn's Landing.





ABOVE: Children watch as Alfredo Navarro, a professional Mexican dancer and teacher, trains young dancers in the intricate traditional dances that they then will perform at Mexican cultural events.

RIGHT: Several of Mr. Navarro's students entertain a crowd at a flag raising event at City Hall.







LEFT: For over 134 years, St. Thomas Aquinas parish in South Philly has been the home of many immigrant communities from its South Philly neighborhood. St. Thomas offers masses every week in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Indonesian. Flags from the different countries that make up this Church's multicultural congregation can be seen along the upper balcony.

ABOVE: One of the most popular traditions among Philly's Mexican Catholics is the living Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. It is a reenactment of Jesus' final hours and his journey to Calvary, as said in the prayers of the Catholic Stations of the Cross. The procession route is between St. Thomas Aquinas Church and Annunciation BVM churches in South Philly.



The Reverend Yesenia “Jessie” Alejandro, Vicar of the Episcopal Diocese of Philadelphia and Pastor of the Church of the Crucifixion on Bainbridge Street, administers a baptism to a young congregant. Her congregation is multicultural, with many Mexicans attending regularly.



Soccer is enjoyed by most of Philly's immigrant communities and is one of the world's most-watched sporting events. This photo shows a Mexican team that participated in the City's International Unity Cup Soccer Tournament. The annual Unity Cup Soccer Tournament brings together the many immigrant communities in the City for an event that is loved and shared by all.





LEFT: Cesar Viveros stands in front of the mural of Pope Francis that he created for the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. Cesar is a professional artist and muralist who has won national acclaim for his art and murals in the City.

ABOVE: Cesar co-founded the Iglesias Gardens to start cleaning vacant lots around Lawrence and Arlington Streets in North Philly. The Iglesias Gardens is a multiracial, multigenerational community of growers and activists creating a space to gather, garden, and organize.

Cesar conducts many traditional events and activities for the local Mexican community and has received a City Council Citation for his efforts on behalf of the Mexican community.



ABOVE: Christina Martinez is both a chef and an immigrants' rights activist. A native of Capulhuac, Mexico, Martinez came to the United States in 2009. She and her husband, Ben Miller, started selling tacos out of a cart on their South Philly sidewalk. This led to the opening of South Philly Barbacoa, shown here, at 9th and Ellsworth Streets.

RIGHT: Christina and Ben are also a part of the People's Kitchen, a nonprofit organization started during the pandemic to help support the local Mexican community. The People's Kitchen has provided over 150,000 no-cost meals in this South Philadelphia neighborhood.



OPEN

WEX

MARC ANTHONY

Chef Relief Team

# THE FAMILY FRIDGE

TAKE A LITTLE AND SHARE THE FOOD

TOVA UN POCO  
Y COMPARTIR  
LOS ALIMENTOS

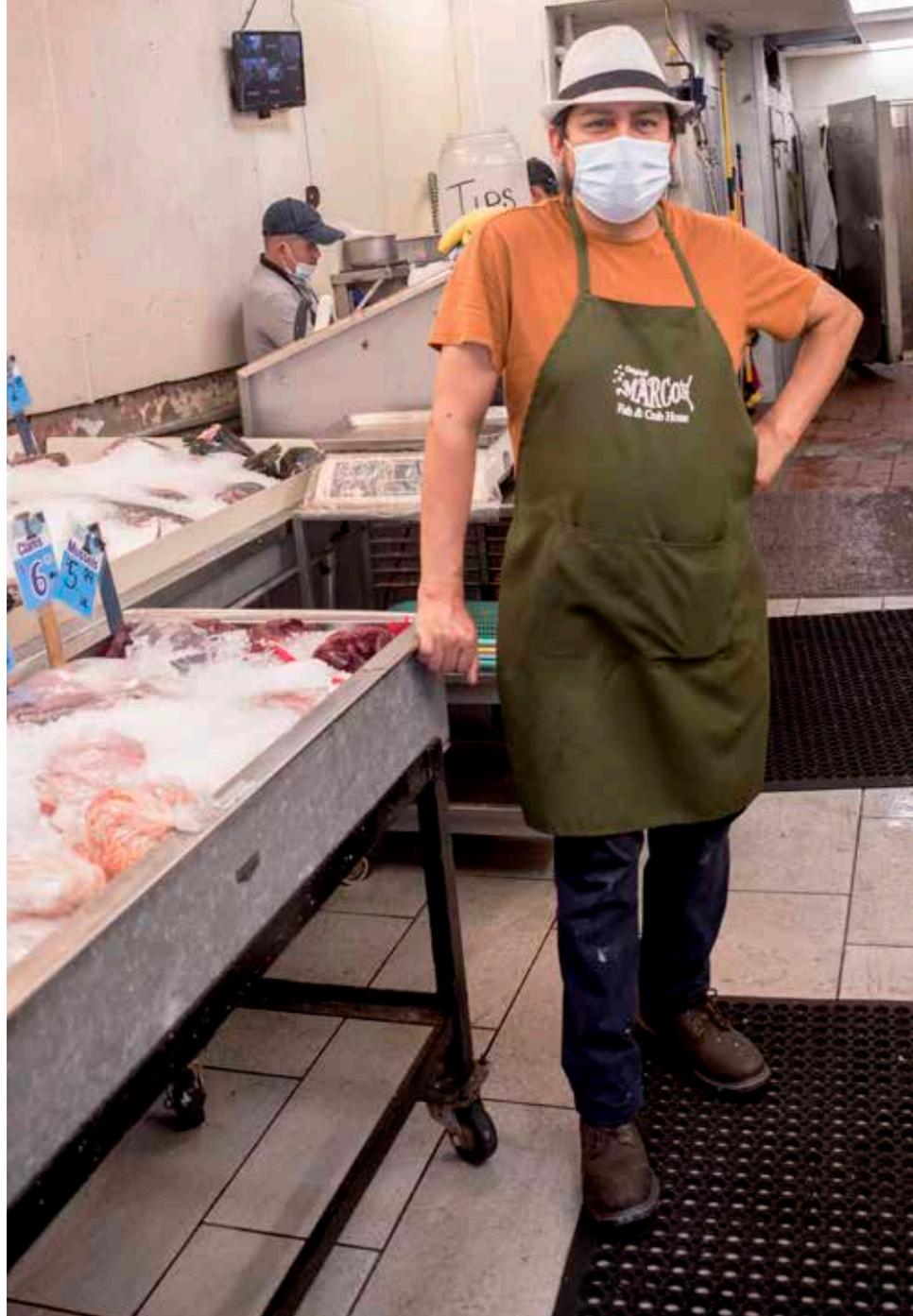
拿一点和分享食物

South Philly  
IG: fridges and family  
24/7



ABOVE: Édgar Ramirez came to Philadelphia in 2006 from New York City. He founded Philatinos Radio, the community digital radio station that has reached and supported hundreds of Mexicans in South Philly during the last nine years. Because of his work at the radio and as the unofficial historian of the Mexican community in the City, Edgar is one of the most respected Mexican immigrants in South Philly.

RIGHT: Marcos Tlacopilco came to Philadelphia from Mexico in 1997 with his wife, Alma. Marcos started working at an Italian fish store, where he learned both the fish business as well as American language and business practices. Today they both own their own businesses on South 9th Street: a fish store and a Mexican restaurant.



Mexican workers in a Phillips Mushrooms growing house in Kennett Square, Chester County, just outside of the City. The majority of mushroom workers are Mexicans, some commuting from Philadelphia.





# Sierra Leoneans

## IN PHILADELPHIA



**S**ierra Leone is on the southwest coast of West Africa. Based on archaeological finds, it has been inhabited continuously for at least 2,500 years by successions of societies migrating from other parts of Africa.

Sierra Leoneans were among the first West Africans to encounter Europeans during the 15th century, and were eventually colonized by the British. Sierra Leone became independent in 1961.

Sierra Leoneans started coming to the United States in the mid-1900s to study (many at Lincoln University, outside Philadelphia), to open small businesses, and for tourism. Within the last 5-10 years, the number of Sierra Leoneans coming to the Philly area has risen dramatically. Most Sierra Leoneans live in Southwest Philly, where they contribute to its growth and improvement.

ABOVE: Musu Kamara is a community advocate who presents traditions of her homeland to selected groups. Here, her clothing bears the colors of the Sierra Leonean flag: green, white, and blue. The head gear is made of palm thatch and is only worn by skilled tribal dancers. The cowry shells are believed to be eyes through which one can see into the spiritual realm.



A ceremonial flag raising was held at City Hall on April 27, 2022 to celebrate the 51st Anniversary of Sierra Leone's independence from the British Empire.



The City's immigrant communities work hard to establish their own identity, in business, politics and religion. Here a group of Sierra Leonean Muslims are gathered at King Jimmie's Restaurant on Woodland Avenue to plan and discuss fundraising for a new mosque to primarily serve their community.



Dr. Kandeh Yumkella visits Philadelphia as part of a broader visit to the Sierra Leone diaspora in the eastern United States. A member of the Sierra Leonean Parliament, he seeks to share issues of importance to Sierra Leone and its scattered peoples.



ABOVE: The Philadelphia International Unity Cup, started by Mayor Kenney in 2016, unites the city's neighborhoods and celebrates its diverse immigrant communities through soccer. Sierra Leone has been in the Final Four in each of the yearly Unity Cup Tournaments. The team shown here was the runner up for the 2022 Unity Cup. Foday Turay, a community leader as well as a soccer coach, stands on the left in the back row.

RIGHT: The Sierra Leone soccer team drives toward a goal in a Unity Cup Soccer Tournament qualifying match in 2022, on their way to the Championship Match at Subaru Park in Chester, home of the Philadelphia Union.





LEFT: Sidi Sacor is a Sierra Leonean entrepreneur, who today owns rental real estate and restaurants in Southwest Philly. He came to Philadelphia from Sierra Leone in 2001 and attended school to get bachelor's and master's degrees in finance. Today his Taste of Africa Holding company has a broad range of investments and services in Southwest Philly.

RIGHT: Muhammed Kamara is the owner and founder of Quality Taste Restaurant on Woodland Avenue. A self-taught chef, he honed his skills making meals for friends and neighbors in Southwest Philly. As this practice grew, he invested in a brick-and-mortar restaurant to prepare and serve traditional African (and Sierra Leonean) food to the community. Like many immigrants, Mr. Kamara preferred to start his own business rather than work for others.





Muslims attend Friday prayers at the mosque located at 63rd Street and Grays Avenue, where the imam is Mohammed Jomandy.



ABOVE: Several hundred Muslim worshippers listen to the imam (standing in front of the crowd, in white) during the 2022 Eid el-Fitr celebration, held annually at the park located at 65th and Elmwood. Ramadan and the holiday that follows it, Eid el-Fitr, are the two most spiritually significant times on a Muslim calendar. This event was held by Southwest Philly's Masjid Ahlus-Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah Mosque.

RIGHT: Two friends greet at the 2022 Eid el-Fitr Ceremony.





In traditional Sierra Leonean weddings, the groom's family offers a dowry to the bride's family. Here the bride's father (center, with microphone) teases the groom's family, saying that his daughter is worth more than the wrapped offering they've brought. (She is seated at the foot of the stairs, with a floral piece pinned in her hair.)

When Sierra Leonean couples are wed, their families are also joined in mutual support of the couple. Generally, a follow-up ceremony is held to make the union legal in accordance with local governmental authority.



In Philadelphia's Sierra Leonean community, one can find Protestant churches such as the New Life UBC church shown here. A typical African Christian Sunday service includes dancing and singing.

Sierra Leone is officially a secular state, but Islam and Christianity are the two predominant religions in the country, with Muslims representing an overwhelming majority. Sierra Leonean Christians are mostly Protestant.



A Lao New Year's Day reveller outside the Chew Street Buddhist Temple.

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—Mayor James F. Kenney



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RIGHT: Musicians at a Haitian Creole mass at St. Barbara's Church in Lansdowne.

