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American Folklore Society Short-Term Consultancy

El Shaddai Ambassadors Choir – Dillon, South Carolina

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Abstract:

For my AFS short-term consultancy, I worked with the El Shaddai Ambassadors Choir, a gospel choir group based in Dillon, South Carolina, made up of resettled refugees from a number of East African nations. The group requested assistance with creating a website to sell CDs and DVDs online that they had previously produced. They intend to donate a portion of the proceeds from sales of their CDs and DVDs to support an orphanage in Uganda. The consultancy evolved from simply creating a website to sell their CDs and DVDs to devising a holistic marketing plan that generates awareness of the choir group and their availability for live performances.

Methodology and Narrative

The El Shaddai Ambassadors Choir is an East African gospel choir based in Dillon, South Carolina, in the Pee Dee region of the state. The choir is made up of resettled refugees from Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Congo. As survivors of the Rwandan ethnic genocide of 1994, the choir members came to the United States as refugees, although they were not initially resettled to rural South Carolina. They voluntarily moved to South Carolina from places such as San Diego, California, through “secondary migration” to seek jobs in Dillon’s manufacturing plants and poultry processing facilities. At the high point of migration in the early 2010’s, there

were over 300 resettled African refugees living in Dillon, although the number has declined in recent years as members of the community have moved on to other cities.

The members of the El Shaddai Ambassadors Choir are devout Christians who sing traditional and modern gospel songs in Swahili and Kirundi, languages native to their East African homelands, as well as in English. They are members of the Outreach Family Fellowship (OFF) church in Dillon. In 2015, the OFF church applied for and received a grant from the South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC) to produce a CD of the choir's gospel songs as well as a DVD of the same songs, recorded with choreographed dancing and vibrant East African dresses. The choir and the OFF worked closely with Douglas Peach, the South Carolina Folklife and Traditional Arts Program Coordinator at the time, to secure the grant funding. In 2016, Dr. Laura Marcus Green, who succeeded Douglas Peach in the same role, contacted me to assist the choir with creating a website to sell their CDs and DVDs. Dr. Green contacted me because I had recently completed a website for my graduate thesis research in the Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability program at Goucher College, and I have worked with resettled refugees in Jacksonville, Florida, for eight years.

I first visited Dillon in October of 2016, where I met Isaac Ndayisaba, the choir's director, along with his sister, a teenager in the local high school. Our meeting was arranged by Maggie Riales, the Revitalization Coordinator for the City of Dillon, who had taken a personal interest in the choir members and who unofficially managed the City's efforts to support its population of resettled African refugees. We initially met in a conference room at the City's Wellness Center, a modern recreation facility and gymnasium. My goal for the first meeting was to get to know the choir a bit better and to determine what they wanted to accomplish by having a website

created on their behalf. Isaac told me that the choir is made up of nearly two dozen members and spans three generations of family members. They sing together at church on a weekly basis and also get together throughout the week for practices. Isaac indicated that they obviously wanted to sell their CDs and DVDs through the website. In addition, they wanted to generate awareness of their choir locally and throughout the Southeastern US to let website visitors know that they are available for live performances and have traveled to neighboring states for performances in recent years.

At the initial meeting, Isaac also informed me that the choir has supported an orphanage in Uganda for about two years. The orphanage serves approximately 50 children whose ages range from toddlers to teenagers. The children live at the orphanage and attend school and Christian church services, and the choir supports them by sending money for school fees, clothing, and school supplies. Isaac explained that the choir intends to donate a portion of the proceeds from the sale of their CDs and DVDs to support the orphanage. This was an interesting development, since Isaac said that as resettled refugees, the choir members now feel a sense of responsibility and obligation to help people in their homelands of East Africa. With a better understanding of the choir's goals and motivations, I returned back to Jacksonville to begin creating their website as well as an overall marketing plan for the group.

For the website, I searched for web design platforms that were relatively low cost and also easy to use. Based on the information I gathered from our first meeting, I had a mental checklist of features that I wanted the website to include: pages for colorful photos and videos of the choir, a dedicated page to tell the story of the orphanage, the ability to process orders and payments online to sell their CDs and DVDs, a simple contact form for website visitors to

request more information or to book the choir for a live performance, and a calendar of events for website visitors to see where the choir is scheduled to perform. Based on the group's needs, I chose to host the website at StartLogic and to build it using the Weebly Pro website design software. I selected Weebly because it is very intuitive and allows a person to easily create a colorful, robust website by dragging items such as photos or text boxes into a template and then changing the fonts and colors as needed. I wanted to make sure it would be as easy as possible for Isaac and the choir members to update the website in the future. Once I had selected the web host and the website design software, I registered the domain name that they had requested – www.munezerofamily.com, which translates to “Happy Family” in Swahili. I had assumed they were referring to their own choir as a family, but I later found out that “Munezero Family” is the name of the orphanage, and they had agreed as a group to name their website in its honor.

In addition to the website, I spent a lot of time thinking about how the choir could market themselves, not only by selling CDs and DVDs online, but also in person and through social media. My research was informed by a book entitled *This Business of Music Marketing and Promotion*, written by Tad Lathrop and published by Billboard Books in 2003. The book encourages music performers and marketers to think about who their intended audience is, what music audience members want to buy, how to remain relevant and stay in contact with the audience as its music interest changes and evolves over time, and how to promote live and recorded music to broaden their audience.

I returned to Dillon one month later in November for my second meeting. I was accompanied by a friend and colleague from Jacksonville, Frances Luna, a Match Grant Job

Developer with Catholic Charities, who assists resettled refugee families with achieving self-sufficiency through employment. Frances and I met with Isaac and nearly fifteen of the choir members at the OFF church for a one-day marketing seminar. Throughout the day, we discussed a variety of topics, including what skills and attributes make their choir strong, what challenges and problems they have faced, what their motivation is for getting together as a choir, where and how to sell their CDs and DVDs locally in addition to the website, how to calculate the profits from a sale after deducting production and shipping costs, where and how to advertise the group for live performances, and more. We also discussed how to create an “elevator speech” to describe the choir’s mission and impact quickly to people they meet and how to seek out partners within the local community.

My goal for this second meeting was to impress upon the choir members that, beyond selling CDs and DVDs online, one of their most valuable assets is their live performances of their songs, dances, and cultural traditions at cultural festivals, weddings, and more, especially as a group of resettled refugees living and thriving in the US. During this second visit to Dillon, I also obtained as many photos, videos, and supporting documents as possible from both Isaac and Maggie Riales for the website-in-development. I was fortunate because they had professional portrait photos made of the choir at the same time that their CD and DVD was produced, so they had a number of high-quality images available for my use.

I developed the website throughout December and into January of 2017, and then returned to Dillon for a third and final visit in late January to show them the website and get their final approval to publish it live on the Internet. Initially, I met with Isaac at his house that he and his family had recently purchased and moved into a few weeks earlier. We started our

day by visiting his local Wells Fargo bank branch to open a bank account on behalf of the choir to receive the proceeds from the online sales. Unfortunately, we ran into a challenge when his bank required a minimum deposit of \$1500 or regular payroll direct deposits to avoid a monthly account fee. At the time of writing this report for AFS, the bank account issue is still unresolved. The choir members are planning to have a meeting to discuss whether they need a separate account to receive the sales proceeds, or if they are fine with one individual receiving the funds into his or her personal bank account on behalf of the choir.

After visiting the bank, I met with Isaac; his sister; his wife (who is not currently a choir member); Wellers, the choir's Treasurer; and Jean, Weller's brother. I showed them the website's features and explained how to use Weebly to edit the content and add photos in the future. I also showed them the other items I had created as part of their overall marketing plan, including business cards made at Vistaprint, a one-page flier created with Microsoft Publisher to mail with the CDs and DVDs, a new Gmail account, and a Facebook page for the choir. We had prepared a list of tasks and assignments that the group would need to do going forward, such as editing the website, updating the events calendar, receiving and responding to email inquiries, packing and shipping CDs and DVDs, and posting new content to Facebook. Everyone present volunteered to take on some of the responsibilities, or they agreed upon how to best delegate the tasks to other choir members who had the appropriate skills and interests. We also discussed the cost of renewing the domain name registration, website hosting, and Weebly software in late 2018, since I prepaid for two years of these costs on the group's behalf.

Our third meeting took place only a few days after President Trump had announced a ban on immigrants from seven nations as well as a temporary ban on refugee resettlement. I

noticed that everyone seemed a bit quiet and subdued throughout our third meeting. Without turning the meeting into a political discussion, I tried to impress upon everyone that they were welcomed and that they were working hard and thriving in the United States. In fact, many of the choir members have become naturalized US citizens in recent years. After the business of the day was finished, we gathered around a few boxes of pizza and watched one of their favorite movies together on Netflix – “Joyful Noise” (2012), a movie about a gospel choir competing in a national competition, which stars Queen Latifah and Dolly Parton. Watching the movie with them and listening to them sing along in English to some of the songs in the movie impressed upon me that they are passionate about their faith and passionate about singing together. In the late afternoon, I concluded the consultancy, wished them the best of luck, and started driving back towards Florida with the choir’s songs playing in my head and in my heart.

Best Practices

For AFS members who might work on a project with a group of resettled refugees such as the choir group in Dillon, I would offer the following ideas and suggestions as best practices. First of all, in an initial meeting, find out who leads the group, speaks on their behalf, and has authority to answer questions and make decisions. Keep in mind that a group of resettled refugees might not be from the same country, have the same educational or economic backgrounds, or even speak the same languages. It’s important to make sure that everyone has input and feels that their voices and ideas are included and appreciated. Remember that everyone has different interests and skill sets. Assess the group’s members, tap into their knowledge and experiences, and ask them if they are willing and able to use their talents for the benefit of the project. It is important to obtain their buy-in so that they feel they have the

responsibility to meet certain deliverables, that they are held accountable, and that they feel a sense of ownership of the project.

Next, gather data and find out what the group wants to accomplish. What are their goals and objectives, and are they realistic? What are their deeper motivations behind those goals? It's also important to set realistic expectations in the beginning, and to explain what you as a consultant can and cannot do and deliver for them. It is also helpful to have a local point of contact who can offer on-the-ground assistance. For example, does the group already work closely with a refugee resettlement agency, arts organization, place of worship, or social services agency? Who is a key contact person at that organization, and what assistance might they be able to provide? What kind of projects have already been done with the group in the past, and what were the outcomes?

Finally, from my professional experience working with resettled refugees in a variety of roles, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to be patient and flexible with them. Language barriers might be a commonly-encountered issue. Remember that resettled refugees are continuously adapting to life in the United States and its cultural norms, business protocols, and more. It is important to remember that they might put a significant emphasis on their employer and prioritize their work schedule, income, and bills over cultural projects. They might agree to a meeting and then cancel it at the last moment because their employer requests that they work overtime. If this happens, do not take it personally. Be patient, and provide them the opportunity to reschedule with you when it is more convenient.

Challenges Encountered

Throughout the short-term consultancy, I encountered a few challenges that required some flexibility to overcome. First of all, as previously mentioned, the bank account needed for processing payments through the website is still not finalized. Isaac and the choir members are meeting in the near future to determine how best to receive the proceeds from sales of CDs and DVDs, and I plan to add the payment processing functionality to the website as soon as they provide it to me. Also, Isaac expressed an interest in translating all of the content on the website into Swahili and Kirundi, but group members were not able to dedicate the time necessary to do this administrative task yet. Next, carrying out the consultancy from a distance (nearly a five-hour drive one-way from Jacksonville to Dillon) meant that I had to rely heavily on email, phone, and text message communications, and sometimes I had to wait for a few days for group members to respond to my questions and requests for more photos and information. A group you are working with might not prioritize the consultancy project as highly as you do. Also, I encountered one challenge that admittedly was my own fault. During my second visit to Dillon, I copied a collection of photos and documents about the choir and the orphanage to a USB drive. I didn't realize it at the time, but the drive was corrupted with a virus, so when I returned home, I couldn't access any of the files. Fortunately, a family friend was able to repair the drive and recover the data, because otherwise I would have needed to ship another USB drive to Dillon or drive back to Dillon to personally copy the files a second time. Let my experience serve as a reminder to everyone to double-check any equipment to make sure it is working properly, and make two or three copies of any data that is critical to the success of the project.

Cultural Sustainability

No project involving a group of refugees, immigrants, or other newcomers is complete without considering the project's impact on cultural sustainability. Culture is continuously evolving, and this is especially true for refugees and immigrants who are seeking a balance between maintaining their former ways of life and adapting to the cultural norms of their new home. If you have the opportunity to work with newcomers, I encourage you to ask them what exactly they want to preserve or sustain. How do they want their cultural elements to be documented, preserved, and shared? Why is it important to them to sustain some cultural elements but allow others to change, evolve, or fade away? What is their passion and underlying motivation in sustaining some elements of their culture?

In the specific case of the choir in Dillon, getting together on a regular basis to sing in Swahili and Kirundi helps them maintain cultural and emotional connections to their homelands in East Africa that they had to flee due to war and violence. In most cases, the choir members never received any formal training in music or dance. They learned the songs by watching and listening to the music performed by their parents and grandparents, and then they perfected their own skills and talents over time, singing with one another in the villages and refugee camps and experimenting with rhythms and harmonization. Now, living in the relative safety of the United States, coming together as a choir brings up memories and connects the group's members to their past: to their ancestors, their homelands, and even their time in the refugee camps. When I showed the website to the group at the third meeting, Wellers smiled at the photos of the orphanage and said it reminded him of home. Even though the choir members are from different countries, singing together overcomes national and ethnic borders and unites them in a shared experience, almost to the point of being a family of relatives.

Furthermore, since they are all deeply rooted in their Christian faith and their belief in God, they believe that coming together as a choir connects them to something larger than themselves and serves as an act of spiritual worship.

Coming together as a choir also connects the group members to their present and their future. For resettled refugees and immigrants, aspects of their life seem to always be in transition: where they live, where they work, what bills they have to pay, and what obligations they have to meet. Singing and performing music can offer a sense of continuity and consistency that might be lacking in other aspects of their lives. Also, to their children and grandchildren growing up in the relative comfort and safety of the United States, stories set in African homelands, war-torn villages, and crowded refugee camps might appear to come from an unimaginable, faraway place. However, a recorded CD or DVD is a snapshot at a certain place and time. When the children and grandchildren listen to the CDs or watch the DVDs at some point in the future, they will hear the joyful energy of their parents and grandparents singing gospel songs in their native East African languages. The recorded songs can help the youth better understand their parents and grandparents, the struggles that they overcame, and the successes that they achieved. The music can help the youth carry their family's cultural heritage forward into the future.

Remember, culture is continuously changing and evolving as it interacts with and is influenced by other cultures. When Isaac and I drove to the bank, I expected him to play Swahili music, or at the very least, to put gospel music on the radio. Much to my surprise, he played a local country music station and explained that he loves country music now that he lives in South Carolina. Intrigued and slightly amused, I watched as he tapped on the steering wheel and sang

along to deeply American country tunes. I felt that same sense of amused curiosity as the group members who gathered for the third meeting grabbed up slices of pizza and enthusiastically sang along to the “Joyful Noise” movie on Netflix. Indeed, culture is continuously changing and evolving. For this choir’s members, at this place and at this time, singing gospel songs in Swahili and Kirundi is just as authentic of a representation of their living culture as is pretending that the television remote is a microphone while singing along to Queen Latifah and Dolly Parton. I sincerely hope that the choir’s members always find endless joy in the act of singing, regardless of the language or the genre of the song.