

BELLA ENGLISH

Tales of hope and pursuit of life in America



Jean Appolon speaking in “Suitcase Stories,” a session sponsored by the International Institute of New England.

By Bella English | JUNE 08, 2018

Jean Appolon was a preschooler in Haiti when he first saw African-American dancers on TV and asked for dance lessons. “My dad was mad,” he says.

Today, Appolon is a prominent dance teacher and choreographer. In a recent review of “The Wiz,” currently at the Lyric Stage Company of Boston, Globe theater critic Don Aucoin praised the “buoyantly propulsive choreography” by Appolon.

But during his childhood in Haiti, there were violent street protests. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, elected president in Haiti’s first free election, was ousted in a military coup and fled the country, the poorest one in the Western Hemisphere.

“There were coup d’etats every other week,” said Appolon, who hid out with his family for six months before they could immigrate to the Boston area. After graduating from Cambridge Rindge and Latin, Appolon got scholarships to study dance with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Joffrey Ballet School.

He’s the founder and artistic director of the Haitian contemporary dance company Jean Appolon Expressions, based in Boston and Port-au-Prince. “This country opened doors for me,” said Appolon, who lives in Malden. He returns to Haiti every summer to “teach and feed” hundreds of children. “Some of them are without parents. Some are without anything.”

Appolon shared his experiences at “Suitcase Stories,” a performance series that features refugees and immigrants telling their tales. Created by advocate and storyteller Cheryl Hamilton and sponsored by the International Institute of New England, the most recent event was held at Derby Academy in Hingham. Last year, the institute served nearly 2,000 clients from 66 countries, offering resettlement, education, employment, and citizenship services.

“Suitcase Stories” offer a stark contrast to the Trump administration’s nationalist rhetoric and crackdown on immigrants, including the failed travel bans, which come at a time when, according to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, more people are displaced by war and violence than since World War II.

Those who take the stage at “Suitcase Stories” are a healthy reminder that our country was built on immigrant success stories.

Murray Glazer was born in Poland in 1950 and immigrated the same year with his family to Israel, and then to Brooklyn at age 8. His parents worked in a garment factory, and no one in the family spoke English.

Glazer said he was bullied because he wore a yarmulke, or Jewish skullcap. But things improved when his parents left Bedford-Stuyvesant and bought a house in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn.



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Murray Glazer in “Suitcase Stories.”

“I liked to play with tools,” he said. “My dad said, ‘You’re going to be an engineer.’ I had no idea what an engineer was.” But with a scholarship to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, he became a civil engineer and is founder of Glacon Contracting.

“I’m grateful for this country for giving me the opportunity to fail or succeed on my own merits,” said Glazer, who lives in Hingham and employs dozens of people at his company. “But most of all, I’m thankful to my parents for having the good sense to immigrate to this country.”

In February 1988, Carlos DaSilva arrived in Boston from his native Brazil, expecting palm trees -- like on TV -- but instead seeing “all this white powder” on the ground.

“In Boston, I worked three jobs, 90 hours a week, for a year,” he said. A scholarship student, DaSilva graduated from the National Labor College in Silver Spring, Md., and works in program management and auditing for the state of Massachusetts.



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Carlos DaSilva telling his immigrant story in “Suitcase Stories.”

DaSilva and his wife adopted two boys from Brazil, and became active members of the Hingham community, involved in local sports and politics. He said he was thrilled to be elected to the Hingham School Committee on his second try. When he beat an incumbent by 400 votes, he was told

that he had just become “the first Brazilian-American elected to public office in the whole country.”

He added: “It’s great. I feel I have become an inspiration to others.”

Listening to their stories is indeed inspirational, regardless of the age or culture they came from. Rehema Rwakabuba and her family were refugees from Congo by way of refugee camps in Rwanda and Uganda. “I was in the eighth grade in Kampala, preparing for the national exam, when my mother came to the school and said our visa had come to go to the United States. We were leaving in five days. This was after waiting six years.”

For years, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been beset by wars that have killed millions, and by political turmoil, corruption, and cholera.

Rwakabuba knows she is lucky. She was 14 when her family arrived in Lowell in 2011 “as the first Congolese refugees there.” She joined the high school track and cross-country teams and is now a junior at Fitchburg State University, majoring in political science. Last year, she became a US citizen.

When she graduates, she hopes to attend the London School of Economics and Political Science to get a master’s in international development and public policy migration. “My dream is to be able to work with an immigration office or international organization focusing on Africa’s development,” she said.

Perhaps President Trump should attend the next “Suitcase Stories,” on June 20 at City Winery in Boston, and see first-hand that people like Rwakabuba are the hope, not the scourge, of America.

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