Funding Report to
Ethelwyn Dootlittle Justice and Outreach Committee

On April 19, 2011, The Ethelwyn Dootlittle Justice and Outreach Committee awarded the Refugee and Immigrant Fund (RIF) a $3,000 grant to support its Urban Farm Recovery Project. This report provides information that demonstrates the success of the project and shows how the funds were used to support this exciting work with asylum-seekers.

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Overview of Urban Farm Recovery Project and Doolittle Justice Funding

The Refugee and Immigrant Fund (RIF) received a $3,000 grant from the Doolittle Justice Fund to support its 2011 Urban Farm Recovery Project. The goal of this pilot project was to provide green jobs training and psychological healing to asylum-seekers. RIF provided each intern with a $400 monthly stipend to cover their food and transportation costs. RIF was able to gather funding for three interns for a period of six months from April to September 2011. The Doolittle Justice Fund’s generous contribution of $3,000 represented a substantial portion of the $7,200 total program cost.
Project Background & Participant Selection

In April 2011, three RIF clients were placed as farm interns at the Brooklyn Grange, a one-acre rooftop farm in Long Island City, and a few blocks away from the RIF Asylum Center in Astoria. Those selected to participate in the project were Florence 22 (Cameroon), Kathy 21 (Cameroon) and Erick 28 (Central Africa). These three individuals initially came to RIF for our legal orientation services in conjunction with their request for asylum in the US. They were newly arrived in the country. Kathy and Erick had arrived a few months earlier and Florence had been in New York for a year. Though each displayed incredible strengths and resilience, each of them had also suffered severe political and sexual violence in their home countries and were deeply traumatized. RIF selected them for its Urban Farm Recovery pilot project for three reasons: they had prior farming experience back home, they had basic English skills, and they felt that working outdoors would help them recover psychologically.

Project Activities

Growing Season (April – September 2011)

The three farmer interns began their internship in April and were expected to work two days per week. They worked under the supervision of Ben Flanner, the head farmer at Brooklyn Grange.

Their initial duties included work to rebuild the planting beds, which had been covered by snow during a good part of the winter. They then transplanted the tomatoes, peppers and eggplants which were started in a green house on the roof top. Erick was very proud to build the chicken coop that housed the Grange’s five new chickens.

The interns’ prior agricultural skills were soon evident to the Brooklyn Grange staff. Once their experience was recognized, they were asked to take on more responsibilities at the farm, which they gladly did. Visitors from all over the world came to visit the rooftop farm this year, and RIF interns were often asked to demonstrate their work on behalf of the farm.
Each RIF farmer intern worked on a different day of the week, which meant that they met several other interns and used this opportunity to practice their English with their new colleagues.

Throughout the season, Maria Blacque-Belair (RIF Executive Director and licensed clinical social worker) held a monthly group meeting to debrief with the interns about their experience and to monitor their progress.

**Results**

**Psychological Benefits**

Analysis of the feedback from the RIF interns who participated in the pilot project points to clear psychological benefits. Though a small sample size, 100% of the interns reported that their participation in the project increased their self-confidence, which had been shattered by the persecution they had suffered in their home countries. They shared that they *felt that their skills were appreciated* and they loved the fact that they were given responsibilities, which helped them *feel productive.* They *reported feeling useful and much less hopeless* than they were before the project started.

The project addressed the profound sense of isolation that often accompanies the asylum-seeking process for new immigrants. Interns reported that the project decreased feelings of loneliness because it afforded them an opportunity to meet and work with a welcoming community of urban agriculture enthusiasts. For example, Florence had totally isolated herself before starting the internship. However, with the sense of confidence she developed through her participation in the program, she began going to parties organized by other interns and reported that she enjoyed things like exchanging music CDs with her new friends.

Each of the interns said that they felt they had found a new family at the farm. They particularly appreciated the team spirit that was created by the Brooklyn Grange staff. They felt that it was a more inclusive management structure than what they had experienced in their native countries.

**Social Integration and Benefits to American Society**

The internship provided farmer interns with a unique way to understand mainstream American society. Interns worked alongside Americans and had a chance to improve their English skills and also learn about how Americans work and interact with each other. This setting exposed interns to a diverse array of identities and experiences, which may not have been available to them had they taken a job in the industries typically open to new arrivals to this country.
On their side, the Brooklyn Grange staff has termed the collaboration with RIF as a success. They were impressed by the hard working attitude of the interns and also enjoyed getting to know more about the plight of asylum-seekers in the US.

The three interns were provided with a certificate demonstrating their successful completion of the program and expressing the Brooklyn Grange’s appreciation for their work this year. (Please see enclosed a sample).

**Interns’ Current Statuses**

Kathy was granted asylum last May after RIF matched her with a pro bono attorney at African Services and provided a psychological evaluation that was instrumental to her case. In August, she withdrew from her internship at the Brooklyn Grange because she found a full time job as a home health attendant in an elderly nursing home. We were thrilled that she secured permanent employment and believe her experience at the Brooklyn Grange offered the psychosocial support necessary to make this happen.

Florence was recently granted asylum in October 2011 after RIF provided her with a legal consultation and accompanied her to immigration court. She was very proud to introduce her internship certificate into evidence at her asylum hearing. She is hoping to find a job soon and would like to study agriculture at the university level. RIF is supporting Florence in this by referring her to a refugee assistance program and exploring additional training opportunities in NYC for the next growing season.

Erick is in the most difficult situation. The final decision on his asylum status has been referred to an immigration judge, who has given him a hearing date in 2014. He has been fortunate to have free housing through a Sojourner’s volunteer but his stability remains precarious.

**Future Projects**

In view of the fact that this year’s pilot project exceeded our expectations and was judged a success by RIF farmer interns and our partners at the Brooklyn Grange, RIF plans to replicate and expand on the project next year. Our partnership with the Brooklyn Grange in Long Island City will continue and expand to include internships at their newly-leased location in Brooklyn. We are also in touch with the Director of Agriculture at the Queens County Farm, who has expressed an interest in hosting farmer interns in 2012.
We are grateful that the Doolittle Justice Fund was instrumental in supporting our pilot project and we hope that we can apply for funding for 2012.

## Financial Reporting

### 2011 Urban Farm Recovery Project Budget

- **Total budget of $7,200 provided stipends for 3 farmer interns for 6 months at $400/month**
- **The Doolittle Justice Fund’s generous $3,000 contribution:**
  - Fully-funded Kathy's five month internship (5 months at $400/month = $2,000)
  - Partially-funded Erick's internship (2.5 months at $400/month = $1,000)
- **The remaining $4,200 was funded by private donations.**

## Conclusion

In spite of hard economic times affecting everyone in the US and a dysfunctional immigration system, RIF remains committed to its mission of providing psychosocial and legal services to NY's most vulnerable immigrants. RIF attempts to represent and help recently arrived individuals who have fled for their lives in search of a better future in the United States. Our clients face challenging recoveries that can be long and frustrating. However, when are clients are able to remain legally in this country, it is always an extraordinary experience to be part of. We literally have a chance to witness our clients' rebirths as many call it. RIF is deeply grateful to the Doolittle Justice Fund for being a supporter and a partner in this endeavor.

RIF believes (and this year's pilot project has confirmed) that the shared experience of growing food in an urban environment will literally connect immigrants to their new land, as well as have psychological benefits for refugees who have been traumatized due to torture and persecution in their countries. The project addressed immediate needs of asylum-seekers at a time in their life when they are in limbo, awaiting a positive response to their asylum claim and therefore are particularly fragile, vulnerable, and in need of sustenance. In the long term, we expect to expand this project into a full-fledged model for refugees, combining job training with psychological healing to create a uniquely beneficial program.

We are sincerely grateful for the Doolittle Justice Fund's support of this pilot project. In addition, we wish to extend a special thanks to Diana Stewart for her tireless efforts on behalf of asylum-seekers and to the farm this summer.