

BAD AXE CUTS THROUGH XENOPHOBIA AT WNY REFUGEE FILM FEST

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Journey's End Refugee Service held its sixth annual Western New York Refugee Film Festival this weekend at the Tri-Main Building on Main Street in Buffalo, NY. The fundraising event kicked off Thursday night with a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. A pizza party mixed with international foods set the stage, while local refugee art and handcrafted gifts were on display for attendees. The night featured a screening of *Bad Axe*, an Oscar-shortlisted documentary by David Siev. The festival doesn't stop there, though- it continues virtually until April, wrapping up with a global reception and an in-house screening of *Flee*, another standout film.

The festival, the first of its kind in the U.S., was launched in 2017 by Journey's End with the goal of not just raising funds, but also to "educate, enlighten, and entertain," as CEO Pamela Bos Kefi put it. It has grown since then, serving as a platform for more than just storytelling. It's about advocacy, awareness, and creating spaces where important conversations about refugee life and integration can happen.

Pamela highlighted one of the most critical challenges refugees face when they arrive in Buffalo: "access to acceptable, appropriate housing." As she explained, "We have a really big problem with housing in Western New York...refugees don't come with a credit history, so they won't qualify for [low-income housing]." That is a tough reality to face when you're

starting over in a new country, especially in a city with plenty of vacant properties. Journey's End works to solve this by securing leases and agreements to house these displaced families and individuals, but it is still a hurdle.

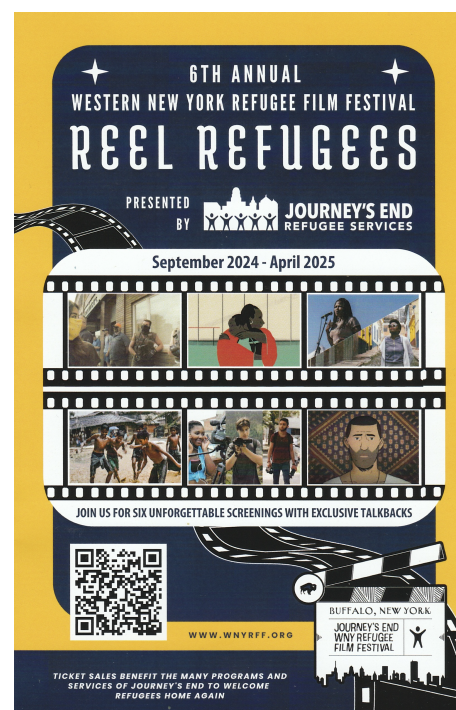
The physical part of the festival took place on the fifth floor of the sprawling Tri-Main complex, a massive space that spans two blocks between Main Street and Halbert Street. The venue offered plenty of room for conversation, food, and reflection. Attendees enjoyed dim sum and Franco's pizza as they gathered in small groups to talk about the current global refugee crises. One attendee, John, a local attorney, said he heard about the event on Instagram and came because, "I like documentaries, and I wanted to support the whole cause." It was a laid back but thought-provoking vibe- people from different social classes all coming together to connect over the issues and share meaningful conversation.

After the food and chats, the film *Bad Axe* took center stage in the intimate theater. The documentary focuses on the Cambodian-American family running their small-town Michigan restaurant during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. What they endure- rampant xenophobia and racism- was a theme that struck a chord with the audience. It was a powerful experience, made even more impactful by the discussion that followed.

The post film talk-back, led by Dr. Secil Ertorer, focused on the experiences of Asian Americans facing similar discrimination in Western New York. Dr. Ertorer, who has done extensive research on xenophobia and its effects on immigrant communities, shared her insights into the increasing hostility these groups experienced during the pandemic. It was a chance for the audience to engage directly with the material, connect it to their own experiences, and really think about the broader implications of the film.

But the festival doesn't stop with *Bad Axe*- there is a full line up of films that explore various aspects of the refugee experience. These screenings are happening virtually until April and include:

- *Bad Axe*
- *Flee*
- *Alone (Seules)*
- *I Came From Away*
- *Nos Vemos Pronto*
- *Wandering: A Rohingya Story*
- *Displaced but Not Defeated*
- *Return Date: Unknown*
- *Out of Aleppo*



Each of these films tells a different story, shedding light on the challenges, fears, and triumphs that refugees experience. *Alone (Seules)*, for example, uses a unique blend of real footage and animation to tell the stories of three unaccompanied minors- Afshin from Iran, Alain from Burundi, and Patricia from Uganda- as they try to rebuild their lives in Canada. *Wandering: A Rohingya Story* is an immersive look at the largest refugee camp in the world, with over 700,000 refugees (about half the population of Hawaii) in Bangladesh.

Tickets for virtual screenings are available for \$12 on the festival's website (<https://www.wnyrff.org>), making it accessible for anyone who wants to take part. For those looking to support in a bigger way, \$100 ambassador tickets include access to all the films, both in-person screenings, plus a door prize raffle entry and an invitation to the grand finale reception in April. It is an opportunity to watch these films, join the conversation, and make a difference in the lives of displaced people.

Journey's End continues to make a lasting impact in Buffalo, providing services like housing support, language classes, job training, legal assistance, and cultural orientation programs. These resources are crucial in helping refugees transition into their new lives and communities. Journey's End believes it's not just about helping them survive- it's about helping them thrive.

To find out more about Journey's End, their work with local refugees, and how you can contribute or get involved, visit their website at <https://www.jersbuffalo.org> The Western New York Refugee Film Festival is more than a fundraiser- it's a platform for change, a chance to come together, and an opportunity to take action for those whose voices aren't always heard. The films, discussions, and events provide a window into the lives of refugees, offering a chance for audiences to reflect, empathize, and connect with other supporters and those whose journey may be different, but hopes are the same.

(Photo Credits: Top- Daniel Gentz / Bottom- Journey's End)

