

## GUEST COMMENTARY

# Immigration issues not unique to U.S.

"Don't expect a warm reception."

These words from a well meaning and well traveled family member haunted me as I sat on the metro heading to Central Brussels. In my 17 hours of traveling across the Atlantic, I mentally went over responses to criticisms of the United States.



Mary Burt

As part of a delegation of 12 Americans participating in a cultural exchange with the country of Belgium to identify best practices in immigrant integration, I expected scrutiny. However, I was met with a very warm reception that evening from the 20 locals who had prepared essays on what it means to be Belgian.

Not surprisingly, many of them do not know what this means. In this country of 10 million that is a quarter the size of Colorado, there is an estimated 175 different nationalities and it is officially bilingual (Dutch and French).

Our first visit was with the Charge D'Affairs, Wayne Bush (no relation), of the American Embassy in Belgium. He said to us, "Immigration is the fundamental issue of our time;" and, "if you are to have immigrants in your country, you need to consider them part of your future."

Our Department of State is trying to put more emphasis on these issues by sponsoring things such as this exchange with the Belgian King Baudouin Foundation. In the U.S., 12 immigrant practitioners were chosen from "new" immigrant growth states — Colorado, Washington, Michigan and Georgia.

Americans are grappling with undocumented workers and failed reform. In Belgium, major issues are terrorists and a racist political party.

There, terrorist groups use the country as a logistical base. They have been responsible for bombings in Madrid, post 9/11. The Flemish far right "Vlaams Belang" party advocates racist policies. They support apartheid and forced repatriation of non-European whites. They tried to make it illegal for Muslims to wear traditional dress and they now have 25 percent of electoral support in Flanders, which is the northern Flemish (Dutch) speaking part of Belgium.

During my stay I visited 15 organizations and learned about 40 different programs that focus on social cohesion. The government sponsors integration

centers, where mainly Dutch or French language is taught. Some Belgium programs are required: In the Flanders region all newcomers must enroll in language classes promptly or face a hefty fine.

Historically, the people who come to Belgium may be European Union (EU) migrants or are undocumented guest workers. They were encouraged to bring their families and, like many guest workers in the U.S., overstayed their visas — yet still reside in Belgium despite the country having an average unemployment rate of 18 percent. This rate doubles if you are an undocumented immigrant and is an issue that contributes to the radicalization of young immigrants in Belgium, who are recruited by networks of terrorists.

Negative views towards immigrants in Belgium date back to 16th century. Complaints are similar to those we hear in the U.S. — "They are taking our jobs away" being among them.

One person told me many Belgians feel the U.S. "gets all the good immigrants."

I never had to use my practiced responses because the Belgians were very educated about issues in America. We did talk about health care and the current administration, but the Belgians I met were more interested in myths they had heard about Americans.

If anything, the notion of a global community was reinforced during this visit — we are all facing the same challenges in a post 9/11 world. We all want prosperity, to be acknowledged and to live in safety.

Now that border enforcement is actually working in the U.S., states are seeing the negative economic ramifications. Anti-immigrant legislation is resulting in billions of lost tax revenue and crops rotting with no one to harvest them. This issue is not going to go away.

Hopefully immigration reform will stop being tossed around like a hot potato and when it is taken up again we can — like the mission of the King Baudouin Foundation — all "work together for a better society."

(Mary Burt is Gunnison County's Immigrant Integration Coordinator, a project of The Colorado Trust Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Family Initiative.)

## LETTERS

## 'In Our Hearts'

Editor:

In memory of Jeffrey D. Carpenter, a beloved son, brother, uncle, husband and stepfather.

A poem in his memory by Natalie Moore:

We thought of you with love today, but that is nothing new.

We thought about you yesterday, and days before that, too.

We think of you in silence, we often speak your name.

Now all we have is memories and your picture in a frame.

Your memory is our keepsake, with which we'll never part.

Death has you in its keepings, we have you in our hearts.

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(So are we!!)

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