

New Portlanders

Tim Cowley has created a platform for promoting immigrant- and refugee-run businesses in Portland

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

What's the best way to help immigrants and refugees? It's a question Tim Cowley's heard a lot lately.

Before moving to Southeast Portland one year ago, Cowley was working on community development projects in East Africa, where he said he saw how a hand up can be more impactful and dignifying than a handout.

He also discovered local connections who can help you learn how to survive in your new home are crucial to successful acclimation.

He said he remembers thinking to himself, "What if we could mobilize people in Portland to interact within places in their communities, and be that bridge between American culture and new-Portlander cultures?"

That's why in December, he launched NewPortlanders.Net, a website where users can post reviews and photographs of immigrant- and refugee-owned businesses in the Portland area.

The idea behind the website is twofold: Help foreign-born families to be self-sufficient while connecting them with people who reside in their new community.

Anyone can submit a review and photos of a local immigrant-run restaurant, food cart, salon or other service-based business for publication on the website.

"I'm trying to keep it simple and have some visuals, without making it too complicated," said Cowley. "Everyone has a phone; they can take pictures."

Cowley's career has centered mainly on assisting Christian-based nonprofits through digital media. Today he directs Expat Media Pro, a collaboration of media professionals who market overseas nonprofits.

He created NewPortlanders.Net as a side project which he hopes will open a door to new friendships and support for immigrants and refugees seeking a fresh start in Portland.

The site also provides a directory of other ways to support immigrant communities, with a list of charities serving their needs and a menu of options for helping new arrivals, such as making welcome kits or adopting a family.

Still in its infancy, New Portlanders featured just three local businesses at press time: Juba East African Restaurant, Abu Hassans Iraqi Food Cart and Taqueria Mi Mole Mexican Restaurant.

But with more than 22,000 self-employed immigrants living in Oregon, there is no shortage of entrepreneurs who could be reviewed for the site.

Immigrants and refugees make a significant contribution to the state's economy. Their businesses in Oregon generated \$473.8 million in income in 2014 while providing more than 70,000 jobs, according to a New American Economy



PHOTOS BY DIEGO DIAZ

Street Roots met with Tim Cowley, above, creator of New Portlanders, at the first restaurant he featured on his site, Juba. It's a Somali restaurant on Southeast 122nd Avenue owned by Somali refugee, Karani Jeylani, at right. For six months Jeylani has been serving up generous portions of his family's authentic East African recipes.

report released this past summer.

Cowley said he would have launched New Portlanders regardless of the current political climate, but that climate is what's ignited an increased interest in helping immigrants and refugees, and he's hoping his site will do just that.

Popular online foodie publication Eater recently stated that despite being "inundated" with requests for lists and maps of immigrant-run restaurants its readers could dine at, it is refusing to do so, citing fears they "would double as cheat sheets to help intolerant actors find new people, businesses, and families to target."

Eater later edited its statement to include a form business owners can fill out if they give their permission to be featured "on a potential list of immigrant- and minority-owned businesses."

Cowley said people interested in contributing to New Portlanders should take a few precautions, such as steering clear of questions around immigration status when speaking with proprietors and obtaining permission before featuring their business or photograph online.

For diners unfamiliar with patronizing immigrant-run establishments, Cowley advises approaching the experience with an open mind.

"Look at it like an adventure," he said.

Reviewers shouldn't expect the same style of customer service they might receive at a typical American business.

"You have to recognize that you're dealing with different rules. People have not come here and adopted all the American rules for everything," said Cowley.



Street Roots met Cowley for a weekday lunch at Juba, a Somali restaurant on Southeast 122nd Avenue.

We ordered the salmon (\$12), beef (\$10) and a gyro (\$5.99).

When owner Karani Jeylani came from the kitchen with salads, tall cups filled with mango juice and whole, unpeeled bananas for each of us before our meal, we asked Cowley if we were getting special treatment. He explained this was how meals are typically served in East Africa.

"When we first came here with some friends who lived in Kenya for a long time," he said, "a different meat was brought out than what we ordered. We all laughed, because we know that always happens in Africa."

On this particular day, however, we all got what we ordered. The entrees were simple yet delicious and delicately spiced, with generous portions of sautéed beef, a thick, moist salmon steak and heaping sides of goat-broth-flavored basmati rice. After our meal, Jeylani brought us fruit cocktail and mango yogurt desserts.

Jeylani said the food was made using his family recipes. Originally from Somalia, he moved to the U.S. in 1997 and has been in Portland for five years. He opened Juba, along with an attached market carrying Somali ingredients, about six months ago.

The Cowleys were delighted to discover the East African restaurant within blocks of their new Portland residence. After spending most of their childhood in Africa,

WRITE A REVIEW; BUILD A BRIDGE

Writing a review for NewPortlanders.Net is easy. Simply introduce yourself to the owner of the restaurant, salon or other service-based business, ask them about their establishment, write about your experience there and take a few high-resolution photos with your smart phone. Email your review and photos to Tim Cowley at babatim@gmail.com.

Obtain permission from the proprietor first, making sure it's understood that your review will be posted online. If you want to publish the owner's name, get permission for that separately.

Due to the current political climate in the U.S. and traumatic events many immigrants and refugees have experienced in the past, reviewers should be respectful and understanding of anyone who doesn't wish to be featured or photographed.

To learn more about writing reviews for NewPortlanders.Net, visit the website and click on "Become a Bridge."

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