



Welcoming and Inclusion as a strategy for the development of small cities in the USA and Germany
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Preface

For almost ten years, I have been working in the administration of the city of Emmendingen, Germany, in the Department of Immigration and Integration. In my work, I have benefited enormously from regional and national peer networks that share good practices and standards for strategic welcoming of immigrants. After participating in a transatlantic study tour on social cohesion in 2023, organized by the American Council on Germany, I became increasingly interested in learning more about welcoming strategies in the United States, particularly in smaller cities. In September and October 2025, I traveled again to the USA on a McCloy Fellowship for four weeks and visited nine cities across five states. I conducted open interviews with fifteen professionals and activists about their work, challenges, and practices, and I also visited museums and met with immigrants, activists, and volunteers.

In the months leading up to my trip, I was unsure whether I would actually encounter welcoming practices—or even local officials willing to discuss them. The national debate on migration was highly polarized, with the rollback of DEI policies and new proposals to expand deportations dominating the headlines. However, the reality I encountered during my visit was strikingly different. First and foremost—with the help and support of my contacts from the study tour and the Welcoming America network—I was warmly welcomed by colleagues in local government, community leaders, and volunteers. Those deeply involved in welcoming work expressed frustration with the increasingly aggressive and divisive national rhetoric, which they felt had little connection to their lived experiences and reinforced harmful stereotypes about migrants. Yet, despite these challenges, everyone I spoke with remained steadfast in their commitment. I encountered a widespread desire to bring local context, nuance, and facts back into public conversations on migration.

My thanks go to my colleagues in the city administrations, and to the volunteers, activists, and immigrants who took time out of their busy lives to speak with me. I also want to thank Welcoming America for advising me on which cities to visit and for facilitating many of my contacts and the staff of the American council on Germany for their support.

Demographic change in Germany and the United States

Slowing population growth and a rising median age are significant trends in many developed countries. In both the United States and Germany, these developments mean that decades of progress in innovation, education, poverty reduction, and health may become difficult to sustain. In the coming decades, these demographic shifts combined with climate change and economic incentives, are likely to increase migration from younger developing countries into aging developed ones. These global megatrends influence nearly all policy areas, including those at the municipal level. A closer look at the recent demographic developments of two small cities, Emmendingen in southwestern Germany and Lewiston, Maine in the United States, can illustrate these trends.

Emmendingen, Germany

Emmendingen is a mid-sized town in the state of Baden-Württemberg, with a population of around 30,000. Over the past several decades, the city has experienced modest population growth, largely due to migration—particularly from other EU countries and from refugees arriving from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine. Without migration, Emmendingen’s population would be shrinking, as annual deaths outnumber births. Like many places in Germany, Emmendingen faces an aging population; the median age is relatively high (44.5 years), and a substantial share of residents are over 65. Younger generations often move to larger cities.

Lewiston, Maine, USA

Lewiston is the second-largest city in Maine, with a population of about 36,000. It has experienced slow population growth over recent decades, especially compared to larger U.S. cities. However, immigration has contributed to a renewed sense of vitality in the past decade. Historically, Lewiston’s demographic trends were shaped by economic shifts such as the decline of the textile industry, followed by efforts to revitalize the city through infrastructure investment and by welcoming immigrants—particularly those from Somalia and other parts of Africa. Today, Lewiston is one of the most culturally diverse cities in Maine, and the recent influx of immigrants has contributed to lowering the median age.

Addressing Fears: Are Immigrants Replacing Natives?

Immigrants can help offset population decline and aging in countries with low birth rates. However, immigrants are not evenly distributed within countries. Paradoxically, regions with the least experience with immigrants tend to be the least welcoming and therefore attract the fewest newcomers. Most migrants choose larger cities where they can find established communities, employment opportunities, and a population accustomed to diversity.

This means that in some rural parts of both the United States and Germany, migration does not function as a stabilizing demographic force. The fewer personal encounters people have with immigrants, the more likely they are to fear them and the changes they bring. Add to this the rising inequality over the past two decades and the massive economic downturn in the wake of the 2008-09 financial crisis. Globalization, technological advances and immigration has produced a lot of winners, but at the same time there are people who lost out. In the US, immigrants have increasingly become the classic scapegoat to lay blame on for the country's social and economic ills. In Germany the situation is hardly better. People who were already wary of long-term resident so called "guest workers" have grown even more uneasy in light of the large influx of Middle Eastern refugees fleeing conflict. The less accustomed people are to living in diverse communities, the more strongly they may resist visible change.

This is, fundamentally, because immigrants are people and not just workers who disappear when their shifts end. As German author Max Frisch famously noted in 1965: "Wir riefen Arbeitskräfte, und es kamen Menschen." ("We called for workers, and human beings came."). Immigrants bring their own histories, dreams, languages, and cultures. The best way to overcome the fear of being culturally overwhelmed is to create opportunities for genuine contact. A young volunteer I met during a Welcoming Week event in Minnesota, told me how he believes you can "turn" immigrants into Americans: "*Hang out with the new kids, invite them to your home and show them your culture*". What the volunteer describes is in essence the concept of the Intergroup Contact Theory developed by the psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s. Allport demonstrated that interpersonal contact under the right conditions reduces prejudice between people. Once a community begins to see formerly foreign-born neighbors as "one of us," fear loses its power.

Looking back: how immigration has formed the USA and Germany

Looking to the United States for inspiration and expertise in welcoming practices seems obvious. Immigration has been a key component of the American story. Successive waves of migrants have come to the U.S. from the 16th century to the present. The country was not only founded by immigrants, but is continuously shaped by them. Until today the USA remains the world's top destination for migrants. But the popular perception of the US as a melting pot taking in the world's tired and "huddled masses yearning to breathe free", is too simplistic and does not reflect the fact that immigration policy and public narratives have over time oscillated between relatively open inclusion and racially or culturally restrictive visions of the nation. It is interesting to have a closer look on how museums in the USA portray immigration, because that tells us a lot about current narratives and also shapes how Americans (and international visitors) understand what it means to be "American".

New York: Ellis Island and Tenement Museum

The Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, located in the restored main building of the former immigration station, offers visitors an immersive look into one of the most significant chapters of American history. Its exhibitions trace the journeys of the more than twelve million immigrants who passed through Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954. While acknowledging the hardship and challenges of immigrants the overall narrative is celebratory, highlighting immigration as a defining force in the making of the United States. Its storytelling centers on the idea of America as a nation shaped by countless individual journeys - people seeking safety, opportunity, or a fresh start. The museum's exhibit ends with the election of Barak Obama as a symbol of change in America's racial and immigration history toward a more inclusive society.

The Tenement Museum in New York City provides an intimate view of immigrant life on the Lower East Side during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Through restored apartments, visitors step into the former homes of Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, Puerto Rican, and Chinese families. These small, crowded rooms reveal the daily realities newcomers faced: overwork, poverty, illness, and language barriers. The museum also highlights the importance of solidarity and neighborhood networks for survival.

Madison, Wisconsin: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies

The Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies in Madison, Wisconsin documents and interprets the history of German-speaking immigrants and their descendants, especially in the Midwest. The institute highlights why people left German lands, how they built communities in Wisconsin, and the cultural practices they carried with them. German immigrants in the United States were received with a mix of welcome, curiosity, and suspicion. In the 19th century, many Americans admired their skills as farmers, craftsmen, and brewers, and German communities thrived in cities and rural settlements. Yet their strong cultural presence like German-language schools, newspapers, and clubs, also led some to view them as slow to assimilate. During World War I and II, anti-German sentiment surged, resulting in harassment, language bans, and pressure to prove loyalty. Although Germans eventually became seen as a fully integrated group, their experience shows how acceptance in the U.S. has often depended on shifting political and cultural climates.

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Immigration History Research Center

The Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) in Minneapolis seeks to bring historical context, nuance, and facts back into public conversations about migration. Founded in 1965 at the University of Minnesota, it is the oldest and largest interdisciplinary research center in North America devoted to understanding immigrant and refugee life. One effort in that direction is the Immigration Syllabus, created by IHRC and its academic partners, providing educators, activists, and

citizens with a curated set of readings, primary sources and multimedia that place current immigration debates in deep historical perspective. Through long-term archiving, multi-disciplinary research, public lectures, and projects like Immigrant Stories, which collects oral histories and digital narratives from recent immigrants and their descendants, the IHRC weaves a narrative of immigration that emphasizes real humans. In doing so, the center shows immigration as a continuous, vital part of American identity that requires honest, historically grounded conversation rather than stereotypes or simplistic judgments.

Germany's struggle with being an "Einwanderungsland" (country of immigration)

Germany's path toward recognizing itself as an "Einwanderungsland" has been long, and contested. For decades, German national identity was rooted in heritage and ethnic belonging. Being "German" was defined less by residence or civic participation and more by descent and ancestry. The *ius sanguinis* principle was deeply embedded in its understanding of citizenship. This perspective framed immigrants as temporary laborers and cultural outsiders rather than as members of a society in which they could fully belong. Over time, this created a persistent gap between the reality of migration and the public perception of German identity. This mindset was clearly reflected in political discourse. In the early 1990s, then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl famously declared that "the Federal Republic of Germany is not an immigration country," reflecting a reluctance to confront the demographic and social changes that had been quietly occurring for decades. Despite the presence of millions of migrant workers and their families, policy and public rhetoric often treated immigration as a temporary or problematic phenomenon rather than an ongoing and transformative process. A turning point came in 2001 with the Süßmuth Commission, whose report explicitly recognized the reality that Germany had become an immigration country. The report recommended active migration management, integration measures including language and cultural orientation, and policies to support the social and economic participation of immigrants. This report thus challenged decades of denial and provided an official framework for addressing the complexities of a diverse population. Germany is now the second-largest destination for migrants worldwide, right after the United States and has moved from a mostly homogeneous population to a super-diverse society in a very short time period: today, roughly one-third of its population has a so-called "migrant background." The current debate goes from positions that ask for the deportation of large parts of the immigrant population to a position that argues that integration is about inclusion, representation, and the redefinition of national identity. The latter position requires embracing a pluralistic, civic-based understanding of nationality, allowing Germany to reconcile its historical self-image with the realities of a super-diverse, mobile society.

The changing role of cities in migration policy

It is often emphasized that integration of immigrants happens locally, in the municipalities where people live, work, and attend school. It is therefore the cities

who carry the day-to-day responsibility for making integration succeed and it is the cities who suffer from the consequences of failed integration. Yet the local room for maneuver is constrained: the essential framework of migration and integration policy—residence law, asylum procedures, education standards, labor market access—remains determined at the national level. For decades, cities could act only within narrow parameters. Nevertheless, cities in Germany and the USA have developed an independent and increasingly influential role in shaping integration and narratives regarding migration. Local autonomy in the U.S. migration regime has expanded through “sanctuary city” policies, municipal ID programs, language-access laws, and city-funded immigrant resource centers. While these initiatives sometimes clash with state or federal policies, they demonstrate that cities can act as moral, political, and administrative counterweights to a national migration regime.

What unites the U.S. and German experiences is the recognition that integration is not simply a legal process but a social one that is rooted in daily interactions, institutions, and local narratives. Proactive strategies by the local city government can help to ensure that migrants are welcomed to the community, that they can develop their potentials and feel connected. Communities that intentionally bring people from all sort of backgrounds together and foster a sense of belonging reap benefits like mutual trust, less polarization, safety and prosperity. Hence, the governance of integration policy is gaining importance. Good practice regarding the integration of migrants is of interest to an increasing number of municipal administrations and local policy makers.

Good practice in selected cities in the USA

Minnesota

In Minnesota, I found especially compelling examples of how small cities creatively strengthen inclusion, build trust, and expand opportunities for newcomers. Although each community has its own history and demographic profile, several shared strategies can function universally and can serve as an inspiration internationally:

Willmar

Willmar is an agricultural city of about 20,000 residents in south-central Minnesota and the seat of Kandiyohi County. Over the past few decades, the city has experienced significant demographic shifts, particularly with the arrival of Somali and Latin American migrants. Unlike many of its neighbors, Kandiyohi County is growing. Rather than viewing this change as a temporary challenge, community leaders such as Pablo Obrego from the Southwest Initiative Foundation, have embraced long-term relationship-building as a key strategy. City officials, school leaders, business owners and faith communities meet regularly to address emerging needs and prevent

misunderstandings. Community events like Welcoming Week, alongside services such as interpretation and language classes, are vital to creating an inclusive environment and connecting immigrants to the broader community. These efforts are paying off. The Welcoming Week celebration on Sixth Street has become a beloved annual event, and a local high school recently elected a Somali-born student as their homecoming queen—a very American way of celebrating belonging!

But why do immigrants choose to live in a small city like Willmar over urban centers like Minneapolis? I chat with a young man in a cozy little shop selling bubble tea in downtown Willmar, the Pen House Boba. *“My parents really wanted us kids to stay out of trouble and felt it was a much safer environment for us to grow up in a city like Willmar”*. Pen House Boba was opened in 2023 by the young man’s sister. His family are refugees who came to the United States from Myanmar after having lived in a Thai refugee camp. Arriving in the U.S., the kids faced language and educational challenges but with time found a new home. Inspired by bubble tea’s growing popularity in larger cities and noticing its absence in Willmar, they decided to open their own tea shop. This was made possible with the support of the Elevate Community Business Academy. The Elevate program is a 12-week business education and training course operated by the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission. Over 12 weekly sessions, participants learn essential business fundamentals: budgeting, bookkeeping, financing, marketing, legal-structure and insurance basics, and how to build a business plan. By the end of the course, participants develop a concrete business plan and an individualized “action plan” for launching or improving their business. The program targets residents with limited access to traditional support: immigrants, refugees and other minorities. For many participants the program provides a pathway from an idea to actual business by teaching them how to navigate finances, marketing, record-keeping, and local regulations. It also helps overcome common barriers such as lack of business background or unfamiliarity with U.S. business norms. Through this program Willmar now has a more diverse and vibrant local economy: just across the Pen House Boba is a Somali restaurant.

Austin

Austin is home to Hormel Foods, a major food company with its headquarters in the city. The Hormel Foundation is donor to projects like the Austin Area Welcome Center, a long-standing organization that serves as a central hub for newcomer support. It connects immigrants with English classes, legal resources, school enrollment assistance, community orientation and access to employment. The center just celebrated its 25th anniversary with a cultural evening with lots of music and dancing during Welcoming Week. Welcoming migrants is regarded as an important strategy in a city where major employers rely on a diverse workforce. The city has developed a strategic Welcoming Plan that serves as a clear roadmap for making Austin a Welcoming Community with actionable ideas. One of these ideas is the Honorary City Council Program. It serves to make local government more inclusive and accessible, particularly to residents from diverse or underrepresented communities. The program aims to provide a “seat at the table” for community

members who may not yet have had the opportunity to run for office. It is designed to foster civic engagement, empower multicultural leadership, and ensure that city government reflects the perspectives of all residents. Honorary members are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the city council for a three-month term. During this period, they receive all regular council meeting materials, including agenda packets, staff reports, and correspondence, and are invited to attend all public meetings and work sessions. Although they do not have voting rights or the ability to make motions, they are permitted to speak during public forums at the end of council meetings, providing input and sharing perspectives from their communities. Participants gain firsthand experience of local governance, an understanding of city operations, and the chance to build leadership skills.

In Austin I experienced a city visibly embracing diversity, through a poster campaign “All families belong here”, the depiction of the diverse workforce in the cities Spam Museum and by leafing through a book available at Sweet Reads, a locally owned bookstore: “Our Austin, Our America” features portraits of community members paired with personal narratives and showcases the diverse population of Austin.

Winona

The first thing that stands out entering the Winona County office building is a sign at the entrance door that says: “We are committed to building a community where all are welcomed, respected and valued.” Inside I found a reception desk of the city’s longstanding partner: Project FINE is a nonprofit in Winona County, established in 1990, that supports refugees and immigrants in the area. Through Project FINE’s interpreting services and referrals, newly arrived immigrants can more easily navigate city and county services, which otherwise might be hard due to language and cultural barriers. Since 2017 Project Fine annually organizes a Welcoming Week as a platform to bring residents, elected officials, students, and newcomers together. I participated in a citizenship celebration featuring those who have achieved naturalization and a reading of the Winona Welcoming Week Proclamation by the mayor Scott Sherman. I was struck by how the patriotic framing of the event found broad bipartisan support and united all the participants under the theme of being neighbors. Whomever you talk to, sooner or later the name Fatima Said the Executive Director of Project FINE comes up. Her passion derives from her own story as a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina, her leadership has shaped Winona at the institutional level. She played a key role when the city decided to join the Welcoming America network. The work of Project FINE continues to inspire other actors in the region.

Iowa

Iowa has increasingly relied on immigration to sustain population growth and fill labor needs. Many immigrants and refugees have come to work in agriculture, manufacturing, meatpacking, health care, and other essential industries. But

immigration in Iowa is also deeply political. In recent years, state lawmakers, particularly under Republican leadership, have pursued policies aimed at restricting immigration and increasing enforcement against illegal immigrants at the state level.

Dubuque

One city that stands out in Iowa is Dubuque. This is due to the dedication of the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque to the topic of Welcoming. Over the past decade, the Foundation's research and advocacy have helped shape how this city supports immigrants and integrates newcomers into community life. Dubuque is a modestly sized city with around 60,000 residents. The population remains majority White, but the city has become increasingly diverse over time with growing Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander (notably a significant Marshallese population), and multiracial communities. Alex Baum serves as the Director of Advocacy, Data, and Learning at the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque. In this position, he leads the Foundation's efforts around data-driven research, community assessment, and outreach. One of his most significant accomplishments is managing a comprehensive, three-year Immigration Community Assessment for Dubuque and the surrounding seven-county region. That assessment documented a dramatic rise in immigrant populations. These findings helped the Foundation and local partners recognize immigration as a key source of demographic and cultural change in Dubuque. The Foundation's programming was steered to address systemic barriers faced by immigrant communities in the form of two major "collective-impact" initiatives: Better Together Committee, which works on challenges like medical interpretation, school absenteeism, and inclusion of immigrants in civic life; and Project HOPE, an economic-mobility collaborative that aims at improving access to employment, housing, health services, social support, and other opportunities for underserved populations. During Welcoming Week in September, the Community Foundation organizes an impressive annual "Data Walk" which makes key demographic and social trends accessible to residents, stakeholders, and decision-makers. This approach helps ensure that data-driven conversations continue to lead to meaningful and informed action. The inspiring example of Dubuque shows how essential it is for communities to understand their own local data—not only to inform public debate in a polarized environment, but to identify needs, guide action, and build effective coalitions.

Wisconsin

Wisconsin's identity was shaped by European settlers, primarily Germans, Poles, and Scandinavians arriving in the 19th century. Almost 40 % of Wisconsin's current population claim German ancestry. Among the most visible newer communities in the state are the Hmong. The first Hmong refugees arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s, following the end of the war in Southeast Asia. Over the decades, their

population has grown considerably and today the Hmong are the largest Asian-American ethnic group in Wisconsin.

Madison

Madison, Wisconsin offers an example of a mid-sized city that integrates welcoming principles directly into its governance structures. For example, Madison's Department of Civil Rights has developed a Language Access Plan to ensure that city services are accessible to all residents, regardless of their primary language. The plan informs city staff, elected officials, and contracted vendors about policies, procedures and best practices for providing meaningful access to municipal services and programs for people whose first language is not English. It guarantees translation and interpretation services (in person, by phone, or via video) for public meetings, official documents, and webpages. Among the concrete services offered under the plan are a bilingual "Community Connector" program, translation of vital documents, real-time interpretation for meetings, captions for virtual sessions, and access to on-demand video-relay or phone interpretation. The adoption of the Language Access Plan followed a 2016 resolution by the city council mandating the Department of Civil Rights to develop an inclusive language-service framework. Since then, the plan has been a cornerstone of Madison's broader commitment to equity, inclusion, and nondiscrimination in compliance with civil-rights laws such as Title VI.

Another notable approach is Madison's commitment to community-led planning. The city regularly partners with neighborhood centers, cultural associations, and advocacy groups to gather input from residents who are often underrepresented in formal political spaces. This includes immigrant youth, newly arrived families, and long-time residents who speak limited English. Neighborhood Resource Teams engage residents to help improve the responsiveness of local government services, promote equity, and improve the quality of life.

Regarding the resettlement of refugees, the City of Madison and Dane County work in close partnership with volunteers and NGOs. One such organization is Open Doors for Refugees, founded in 2016 in response to the global refugee crisis. The organization offers a wide range of support services through dedicated volunteer teams. They collect furniture and household goods, furnish and stock new apartments, help families move in, and provide basic home-supplies for up to a year.

Maine

In Maine immigration is modest compared to national averages. The origins of immigrants living in Maine show a striking diversity. While historically many newcomers came from neighboring Canada or other parts of Northern America, more recent arrivals come from Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. New arrivals concentrate mostly in two cities: Portland and Lewiston, creating localized pressures on services and infrastructure.

Portland

Portland has positioned itself as a welcoming city that recognizes immigrants and refugees as key to its social and economic vitality. The Office of Economic Opportunity is part of the city's Housing & Economic Development Department and acts as a central hub, coordinating services, resources, and outreach efforts to support newcomers' integration, economic opportunity, and sense of belonging. One of the office's flagship initiatives is the Natural Helpers Fellowship. Launched in 2020, the program identifies, trains and empowers trusted community members, especially immigrants or refugees, to act as cultural and linguistic bridges for their communities. Natural Helpers assist family, friends, or neighbors with navigating housing, legal aid, schooling, public benefits, and other essential services. Fellows receive leadership training, mentorship, along with support for childcare, transportation, and meals during sessions. By formalizing roles that many immigrant leaders already played informally as translators, connectors, advisors, the program builds capacity for long-term community support. The program also connects the city's administration to people who are aware of the needs and goings-on in their community.

Lewiston

Lewiston is an example of a small city that has been transformed and reshaped economically, socially, and culturally with the arrival over the past two decades of significant numbers of Somali, Congolese, and other African immigrants. Their arrival was not without challenges. The local population, which had been mostly white and of European descent, initially struggled with the rapid cultural and demographic changes. There were tensions, with some segments of the population expressing discomfort with the changing demographics. But Lewiston has increasingly embraced the change. One of the most striking features of Lewiston's approach is the emphasis on narrative reframing. Community leaders actively challenge outdated stories about decline and instead highlight newcomers as key contributors to economic recovery, neighborhood revitalization, and local entrepreneurship. A big shift in changing attitudes toward migration, particularly in regard to its Somali immigrant community, is closely intertwined with an extraordinary event: in 2001, the Lewiston High School boys' soccer team, with a large number of Somali immigrants among its players, made a surprising run to the state championship uniting the whole city in pride. This is a powerful example of how sports can serve as a unifying force in a community grappling with cultural and demographic shifts. One example illustrating the impact a single dedicated person can have, is Julia Sleeper-Whiting. Born and raised in Lewiston Julia studied at Bates college and volunteered in English-as-a-second-language and support programs for immigrants and refugees. This experience exposed her to the needs of Lewiston's changing demographic, especially the challenges immigrant and refugee youth faced. She founded the organization Tree Street Youth in 2011. Initially set up as a summer homework-help program for local youth, the organization grew into a permanent and structured full-year youth center offering after-school care, enrichment, mentorship, college-prep, arts, sports.

My biggest take-aways

The challenges of welcoming immigrants in small cities are remarkably similar on both sides of the Atlantic. It is extremely valuable to learn from each other's practices, and this kind of professional exchange should be encouraged. But after spending four weeks in different cities with so many dedicated transatlantic colleagues, volunteers, and activists, my most important insight goes beyond examples of good practice. Alex Baum from the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, introduced me to the FSG theory of system change. According to this framework, explicit structural change (practices, policies, resource flows) and semi-explicit relational change (power dynamics, relationships, connections) are crucial. However, lasting transformation also requires implicit change in mental models - the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and narratives that shape how people think and act. My biggest takeaways relate especially to these deeper levels of relational dynamics and mental models:

The debate we see in national media does not accurately reflect what is happening at the local level

In national media, immigration is often portrayed in stark, polarized, and partisan terms. Locally, however, the reality is far more nuanced. Especially in smaller cities, where people know one another, communities see immigrants integrating into neighborhoods and schools, joining local sports teams, contributing to the economy, opening small shops and businesses, enriching local culture, and building close relationships with long-standing residents. While the local debate is not free of controversy, it is shaped by everyday encounters and practical experience. As a result, it offers a more complex, grounded, and humanized perspective on what immigration truly looks like in daily life.

The Importance of Relationships and Local Leadership

A key factor in the success of welcoming initiatives in small towns across the United States is the presence of a strong local coalition. Local communities recognize needs and respond to them. Local leaders step in and create solutions that fit their specific context. This fosters a pragmatic, less ideological approach to immigration. When I asked who supports welcoming efforts in their city, I consistently encountered broad, bipartisan coalitions, though each looked a little different. These coalitions often included local elected officials, business owners, immigrants, representatives of various faith communities, NGOs, and city or county staff. In many cases, one or two charismatic individuals play a pivotal role in bringing these diverse actors together. The form this takes may vary from town to town, but the essential ingredient is the same: key community members who champion welcoming efforts. Oftentimes a great deal of responsibility rests on the shoulders of just a few people. The risk of burnout is real. That's why having space for reflection and opportunities to exchange with peers is invaluable for community leaders who want to connect their local experiences with the broader picture.

The Importance of Narratives in Welcoming Migrants

Competing narratives about immigration have always coexisted in the United States. Ideas about who is considered “American” vary widely. While naturalized Germans in Germany are often still perceived as outsiders today, immigrants in the U.S. tend to develop a strong sense of attachment to their new country while simultaneously taking pride in their ethnic heritage. In the U.S., the concept of the *hyphenated American* (e.g., Irish-American) reflects this dual identity. In Germany, by contrast, the term *migration background* still carries an exclusionary tone and is difficult to shed, especially for immigrants who do not resemble ethnic Germans.

Narratives play a powerful role in shaping how societies view migration and how communities respond to newcomers. They influence emotions, policy decisions, and everyday interactions that determine whether migrants feel welcomed or rejected. At the local level, narratives can be reframed around shared experiences such as being neighbors, supporting the same sports team, or revitalizing Main Street through new businesses. In doing so, the story of migration becomes one of participation, mutual support, and community building. Positive narratives are not about idealizing migration but about normalizing it and making it less abstract. Crucially, narratives also empower migrants themselves. When they tell their own stories, they become agents of change rather than passive subjects of debate. This strengthens their sense of belonging and demonstrates that inclusion is created with them, not merely for them. Narratives shape what people believe is possible, helping shift attitudes from a mindset of scarcity to one of abundance.

The United States, with its long history of immigration, is uniquely equipped to anchor these narratives in its national motto, *E pluribus unum* — “Out of many, one.” This is perhaps the most important lesson Germany can take from the U.S. as it works toward fully embracing its identity as a country of immigration.

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