# NEWS

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## Amid ICE fears, craft fair sells artwork by immigrants, refugees

BY CYRUS TURNER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER




CYRUS TURNER / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services hosted a craft fair on Saturday in East Rock, featuring work by 14 immigrant and refugee vendors..

Immigrants and refugees in the New Haven area sold handmade goods at a Saturday craft fair hosted by Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, or IRIS, a local refugee resettlement agency.

The event, which drew roughly 35 visitors, featured 14 vendors and took place outside First Presbyterian Church New Haven in East Rock. Former IRIS clients — immigrants and refugees who received the resettlement agency's support during their transition to the United States — sold handmade goods at each of the stands. Visitors could purchase from a range of artisanal products, including clothes, accessories, quilts and wooden jewelry boxes.

Two additional stands fundraised for the organization, which faced federal funding cuts in early 2025, selling IRIS merchandise and fabric items made by IRIS Women's Sewing Group volunteers.

"This is to support the refugee women," Rona Rohbar, an Afghan immigrant and the senior wellness specialist at IRIS, said.

IRIS holds two craft fairs each year, Rohbar said, noting that the event is meant to provide an opportunity for those "who have some sort of talent, who can make art, handicrafts, jewelry, whatever they can make, to sell and benefit their families."

In the past, the event has had up to 20 vendors, Tetyana Pavelo, a Ukrainian immigrant who works in community engagement at IRIS, said. But the recent political climate has shifted what events many IRIS clients feel comfortable attending, according to Pavelo.

"Not everyone is willing, nowadays, with everything that's happening," Pavelo said. "This is much smaller, but we still wanted to do it for people that are okay doing it and then support the way we can."

Since President Donald Trump took office last January, Connecticut has seen an uptick in Immigration and Customs Enforcement apprehensions and deportations. As recently as late August, ICE's Boston office arrested 118 people in southern Connecticut as part of a four-day enforcement operation.

Emran Marefat, an Afghan immigrant and vendor at his sister's Tazhib art stand, said IRIS maintains a list of immigrant artists they have assisted in the past and can invite to sell products at the fair.

"They have all these exhibitions and then they invite us," Marefat said. "IRIS has been wonderful in helping us."

The craft fair has existed for "decades and decades and decades," Katy Lawder, the director of community engagement at IRIS, said. IRIS was founded in 1982.

The organization has hosted the fair at First Presbyterian Church for many of those years, and the two organizations have a "longstanding relationship," Lawder said.

Eric March, a member of First Presbyterian Church and painter in the New Haven area, attended the fair with his two sons. March said he heard about the event through his church and has attended the fair in the past.

"It's fun just to support and see fellow craftspeople and artists, but also I think it has an extra significance because I know lots of the folks here have been through a lot," March, who purchased a wooden coaster and earrings for his wife, said.

In 2025, IRIS voted to stop receiving refugees through the United States Refugee Admissions Program, following a decision by the Trump Administration to classify Afrikaners, a population of white South Africans, as refugees. The organization is focused on directing its resources towards events like the craft fair that support those who have already settled, Pavelo said.

"We still are very blessed because of the support that New Haven is giving to us in form of volunteers, interns, donations," Rohbar said. "I don't think we could've been that successful if we would have been in some other town, so I truly appreciate their help."

The organization also holds a 5K race in February to fundraise for its programming.

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## Children, parents clean up park for inaugural Kids Service Day

BY JINGCHU SOPHIA ZHANG
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Around 40 children and parents gathered at Scantlebury Park in Dixwell Saturday morning for New Haven's inaugural Kids Service Day. Volunteers young and old raked leaves, picked up trash and decorated trashcans with bright paint and handprints.

The event was a collaboration between the Connecticut Community Outreach Revitalization Program, Civic Works, Friends Center for Children and the toy store Pebbles Toys & Gifts. The four organizations each contributed funding and supplies, according to Caroline Tanbee Smith '14 SOM '25, the founding executive director at Civic Works and the former Ward 9 Alder.

"New Haven is city with an outsized community of amazing small businesses and non-profits who are run by some extraordinary people," Alex Kleiner '08, the owner of Pebbles, wrote in an email to the News. "Each group attracts its own community to the event and allows more people to get to know each other and creates additional bonds across the city."

The event also served as part of a larger effort to increase youth engagement in New Haven, according to Smith.

Between 2016 and 2023, Connecticut experienced the second steepest drop in the nation in percentage of youth aged 14 to 17 who participated in community service, per data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Although the percentage has risen since 2023, youth engagement rates in Connecticut in 2024 and 2025 — at 56 percent — remained 14 percentage points lower than that in 2016.

Smith said in a phone interview that "it's probably not one thing" that contributed to this drop, with possible factors including the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced funding for non-profits and lack of affordable transportation. She added that she thinks New Haven's civic fabric could grow tighter if there were stronger networks for community engagement.

The first Kids Service Day attracted many younger kids and families, especially through its relationship with the Friends Center for Children, an early education center.

Kameisha Mullings, a teacher at Friends Center's Dixwell location, brought her son and daughter. Although her children enjoyed the event — they were busy stamping paint handprints onto a trashcan as Mullings spoke with the News — she said she thought there were few such opportunities in New Haven.

The Kids Service Day was both of her children's first community service event targeted to kids, she said, adding that she hoped there could be more similar events, "especially in different parts of New Haven."

Ward 7 Alder Christine Kim '99 was present with her family, including her son, Wells Kysar. They had been helping out with the trash picking contingent.

"Especially post-COVID, a lot of us are missing that in-real-life connection with people," Kim said. "Not just with people that we know, but people we don't know, but who are our neighbors. And I think activities that neighbors can do together help make us better stewards of our common land, like our parks, but also stewards for each other."

Kysar said he has helped out at other clean-up events in the past, like those organized by Friends of the Green, but volunteers at those events tended to skew older. Kysar said he was "happy" there were so many children volunteering on Saturday, "because for the other ones, I was one of the only kids there." He described that feeling as "kind of lonely."

Though Kim acknowledged that certain community service events may not be as accessible or safe for kids, she also said it made a difference giving children their chance to serve the community.

"It's important for all of us to be there," Kim said, "and for people to see kids doing it. It makes the adults feel like, 'Oh wait, I should be doing this too.'"

Jessica Legere, an administrator at Friends Center for Children, described noticing the reverse of that effect as well.

"It's so important for young children to see the adults in their life – whether they're grown-ups or they're young adults — to really see them working together in a really positive way, and really investing their time and energy in caring for others," Legere said in a phone interview. "It sets such an important example for young children as they're moving through the world to really lean into community."

After the hourslong clean-up, Kleiner of Pebbles Toys & Gifts handed out medallions to each child who participated.

"To whatever degree there are kids and parents who leave this morning being like, 'Hey, this felt really really good. I want to be involved in service again,' I think that's exactly what we're hoping to do," Smith said after the event.

Allyx Schiavone, the CEO of Friends Center for Children, said volunteering at any age is critical for cultivating engaged citizens.

"We need that to start at a younger age, so that people are engaged when they get to a place where they have power," Schiavone said in a phone interview. "I think that's invaluable and should be something we think about for all of our youth."

Scantlebury Park is located at 139 Ashmun St.



JINGCHU SOPHIA ZHANG / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
As part of an effort to combat dropping youth engagement rates in Connecticut, four organizations across New Haven teamed up to host the city's inaugural Kids Service Day.

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