



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF BUFFALO

THE REFUGEES OF COMEDY²⁰²⁵



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2025

6:00 - 9:00 PM

BUFFALO TORONTO PUBLIC MEDIA
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BUFFALO, NY 14202

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Welcome to the Refugees of Comedy 2025!

On behalf of the entire IIB team, welcome!

For over a century, the International Institute of Buffalo has served foreign-born individuals, helping them integrate and adjust to American life. However, people sometimes forget that our mission extends far beyond providing services to help people integrate into our community.



As part of our educational mission, we've held language classes, cultural enrichment classes, and lectures by geopolitical experts and historians that provided insight into how events happening beyond our borders impact us here in Buffalo. For decades, we've hosted an exceptionally successful Model United Nations, now welcoming over 900 students from more than 40 area high schools.

Celebrating the cultures of the people who are coming here is also integral to our mission. That has manifested itself in many different ways. Over the years, we've held folk dances, masquerade balls, dance classes, and cultural nights offering an array of food, music, art, and dance. We've put on small music performances and poetry readings.

Tonight's festivities combine both IIB's educational and cultural mission in a fun way—through the art of storytelling and comedy. Thom Tran, Matt Kirshen, and Corinna Yee are hilarious, so I know you will have a good time! And frankly, who couldn't use a good laugh after the events of the last year?

Tonight's event, aside from being a fundraiser for our organization, will be an extension of our educational and cultural mission as we make Western New York a better place for, and because of, immigrants and refugees. I appreciate that you're a part of it!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Rizzo-Choi". The script is fluid and cursive.

Jennifer Rizzo-Choi
Executive Director

This Evening's Program

- 5:45 p.m.** **Doors open for VIPs**
- 6:00 p.m.** **Doors open for General Admission**
Bar and food stations open
50/50 raffle begins
Merchandise sales begin
- 6:10 p.m.** **Sawa Sawa Band performs**
- 7:30 p.m.** **Bar and food stations close**
50/50 raffle sales stop (drawing at 8:45 p.m.)
Merchandise sales stop
- 7:35 p.m.** **Program begins**
Welcome by IIB Executive Director Jennifer Rizzo-Choi
Refugees of Comedy Performance
- 8:45 p.m.** **50/50 raffle drawing**
- 9:00 p.m.** **Program concludes**
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Master of Ceremonies - Gabe DiMaio, IIB Communications Director

Congolese rumba by Sawa Sawa Band (on Instagram/[sawasawaband1](https://www.instagram.com/sawasawaband1))



Comedian Bios



Thom Tran

Los Angeles-based comedian, musician, actor, and U.S. Army Combat veteran, Thom Tran started his career as a standup comic when his career as a soldier ended, following a gunshot wound to the back of his head while deployed to Iraq.

Moving to Los Angeles in 2008, Thom created the internationally touring all-military veteran standup group, The GIs of Comedy, performing to U.S. service members stationed and deployed to combat zones around the world. The group was featured in Larry Charles' *Dangerous World of Comedy* on Netflix, as well as on CBS and NBC.

Away from the GIs of Comedy, Thom has also toured across the United States and internationally with his friend Brad Williams to Copenhagen, Denmark, Norway, England, Ireland, and more!

Thom makes his home in Hollywood, CA, performing regularly at the world-famous Laugh Factory, Comedy & Magic Club, and rooms all around Southern California.

Thom has also co-starred on *NCIS: Los Angeles* & *SEAL: Team* on CBS, and appears in the dark comedy, "My Dead Friend Zoe" alongside Morgan Freeman, Sonequa Martin-Green, and Ed Harris.



Matt Kirshen

Matt Kirshen started his comedy career in the United Kingdom. He moved to America as a finalist on NBC's *Last Comic Standing*. He has also appeared on Comedy Central's *@Midnight*, *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, Paul Provenza's *Green Room* on Showtime, and *The Nerdist*, and is one of the regular guest co-hosts of *StarTalk* with Neil deGrasse Tyson.

He was a writer for *The Jim Jefferies Show* on Comedy Central, for which he was nominated for a Writers Guild of America Award, and also wrote for *Arrested Development*, and wrote for and appeared on *How To Build... Everything* on the Science Channel and *Comedy KnockOut* on TruTV. He also hosts *Probably Science*, a weekly comedy and science podcast featuring a mix of comedians and scientists breaking down the week's science news.



Corinna Yee

Corinna Yee got her start in standup at her high school talent show, where she did an impression of her Cameroonian French teacher. Since then, she has cultivated material around her mouthful of an identity as a Chinese girl adopted by Chinese professors who sent her to a Jewish Day School.

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History and Mission

In 1918, the International Institute of Buffalo (IIB) was founded during World War I, initially to assist the foreign-born spouses of American soldiers in integrating into Western New York. The Great War was supposed to be the "war to end all wars," but sadly, that was not the case. Another world war and a handful of military actions, ranging from a few months to decades, followed, as did the refugees who came as a result.

In the decades that followed, Western New York also saw refugees arrive independent of the repercussions of American foreign policy. Internal strife, persecution, economic upheaval, and climate change are among the many reasons why many foreign-born people have come and continue to come here.



History shows that, although America celebrates itself as a melting pot of different nationalities and religions, some groups were welcomed with open arms, while others were not. As the recent election has shown, many will happily vilify people who are foreign-born for political gain. Foreign-born individuals, regardless of whether they are citizens, are often easy prey, targeted for their cultural expression or language skills.

That is why the International Institute of Buffalo is here. Every day, we make the case about why immigrants and refugees are beneficial to our community. In addition to that education piece, we provide a forum to showcase and celebrate different cultures.

Our Work

New American Integration (NAI)

Our NAI team members are more than a lifeline to services for our New American clients. They are teachers, guides, shoulders to lean on, mentors, and listeners. They are the first people clients meet in Buffalo and will leave a lasting, positive impression on these families.

This support includes our Intensive Case Management program, which assists clients who have significant medical conditions that were left undiagnosed or untreated in their previous country, such as malnourishment, mobility issues, or learning disabilities.



After our case managers link them for treatment with local healthcare professionals, they have the opportunity to receive premium care. This program has made life-altering differences for them.

Legal Services

Our legal team works diligently to help immigrants and refugees navigate the complex American legal system. They represent clients on applications for work authorization, family reunification, permanent residency, and naturalization. They represent immigrants who are seeking asylum and/or other humanitarian protections including but not limited to temporary protective status (TPS), and humanitarian parole. Our immigration services includes representation in front of U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services and before U.S. Immigration Court, as well as appeal measures.

Employment Services

Foreign-born job candidates are referred to Employment Services to begin their path to meaningful employment. The team places clients with hundreds of employers across various industries, including manufacturing, customer service, landscaping, and hospitality. We provide our clients with intensive training and preparation to enter the workforce, equipping them with the skills to excel in any position and achieve extremely impressive employment outcomes.

We also help immigrants, refugees, and asylees return to their former professional careers or continue higher education through partnerships to attain the credentials they need to apply their trade in the United States. Clients have gone on to work in various



professional occupations, including accounting, pharmacy, engineering, and architecture.

Our Employment Services team also works with the business community to help them increase their workforce and productivity. Not only do we find their new employees, but we also help them with training, cultural understanding, and provide support after hiring, including industry-specific language training and English as a Second Language (ESL).

If a business seeks to expand its market share abroad, we can help it overcome potential hurdles with training in subjects such as international leadership essentials and cultural understanding, as well as practical interpreting and translation services.

Interpreting & Translation

The need to understand and be understood is vital to every community. We have cultivated language expertise for over 40 years and have the largest local network of language service providers in Western New York. Our non-profit social enterprise utilizes professional linguists residing in the greater Buffalo/Niagara region, who serve customers both locally and nationwide. Indeed, for many, being an interpreter or translator is often the first step toward making a living in America for their clients.

The Interpreting team continues to offer in-person services in 51 languages and audio/video remote services in over 74 different languages, with the capacity to do hundreds more. These invaluable services provide comprehensive language access to limited English speakers in WNY and beyond.



Our Translation team currently provides access in 85 languages, with the capacity to service requests in approximately 300 languages, and dedicated staff to meet the demand. Community leaders, employers, educators, local attractions, and various industries continue to expand their reach and visibility through onsite interpreters, on-demand calls/video, and written communications to and for non-English speaking individuals in the area.

We continue to educate and advocate for improved and expanded language access in the community, ensuring that community members who cannot read, write, or understand English fluently have better access to vital information.

Education

The Institute's International Educational program creates cross-cultural awareness programming to promote sensitivity, understanding, inclusion, and equal access to services.

We offer cultural competency training to educate local students, teachers, community members, service providers, and business professionals on how to work with the foreign-born population effectively.

Every year, students become "diplomats for a day" during our Model United Nations conference. Our most recent conference registered over 900 regional high school students from 37 schools, who practiced critical thinking and conflict resolution skills by



acting as delegates from 86 countries worldwide. The conference gives students the context to develop skills and perspectives in becoming globally minded leaders.

Our community lectures present speakers on a range of topics to help our neighbors understand the local impacts of global events, including the following topics: War Crimes, Energy Geopolitics, Politics in Latin America, and Global Famine

Health education and screenings increase awareness in immigrant and refugee communities concerning critical health issues like breast cancer, cancer screenings, and early detection. Our health literacy sessions are helping participants increase their understanding of preventive medicine and how to navigate the U.S. healthcare system.

International Exchanges

The International Visitors Program (IVLP) partnered with the U.S. Department of State and the Library of Congress to bring groups of current and emerging leaders from countries around the globe to Buffalo for professional and cultural visits. We facilitate connections between these visitors and local professionals to exchange best practices, as well as with local community members who welcome these visitors into their homes and share their experiences.



In the past, our projects focused on the following topics:

- Human and Minority Rights
- Migration and Integration
- Innovation and Resilience in Energy, Transportation, and Infrastructure
- Good Governance
- Combating Addiction
- Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development
- Interfaith Dialogue
- Combating Trafficking and Border Security
- Youth Empowerment

Our Future



The International Institute of Buffalo is wrapping up our strategic planning process to determine how we can best serve our community. As the "Ellis Island of Western New York," part of that vision will highlight the legacy of the immigrants and refugees who helped build Buffalo. Along with continuing our current work, IIB's future will include creating an oral history project and digitizing our century's worth of archives, as another way to tell our community's immigrant story.

The International Institute of Buffalo Team

Executive Director Jennifer Rizzo-Choi, JD/MBA, is a refugee and asylum law expert. This experience, combined with her background as a former television journalist, enables her to navigate the ever-changing terrain of running a non-profit organization such as the Institute.

She is joined by a diverse team of 35 professionals, born in nine countries, who speak 18 languages, including English. All are dedicated to making Western New York a better place for, and because of, immigrants and refugees.



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF BUFFALO

Questions?
Reach out today!

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