



# WPI

CROCODILE  
RIVER



MUSIC

## Worcester Community Project Center

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# Promoting Cross-Cultural Acceptance: The African Artist Initiative

## Abstract

Refugee and immigrant awareness is a worldwide issue mirrored in the United States. Crocodile River Music performs concerts in schools and the community to educate New England about African culture, while also offering a cultural ambassador program to assist young African refugees. The goal of this project was to provide a platform for African refugees and immigrants to share their stories and to inspire and empower the refugee and immigrant community of Worcester. In addition, our intent was to provide a resource for Crocodile River Music to promote awareness and acceptance of African culture in the region.

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Crocodile River Music

B term

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The Crocodile River Music project team before presenting in A term.

## The Refugee Problem in the World Today

Refugee and immigrant awareness is a worldwide issue that is mirrored in the United States. Millions of people have fled their home countries in search of a better life. [Figure 1] People who relocate to a new country face difficulties finding success in a new environment because they are alienated by society, lack confidence, and continue to face discrimination in the workplace and in school.



Figure 1: African immigrants and refugees removed from their homes and communities.

A significant portion of people who relocate to Massachusetts settle in Worcester, resulting in a sizable, diverse community. There is an abundance of refugee and immigration programs available in Worcester. The services offered range from assisting refugees and immigrants in learning English to helping them grow socially and economically.

Crocodile River Music has focused on helping African refugees and immigrants. They have hosted various events at schools and in the

community to promote and educate Worcester about African Culture. They also offer a cultural ambassador program, which helps young African refugees develop a career path.

The various community services have assisted numerous immigrants over the years. However, no centralized information base exists where immigrants can read about the lives and successes of their fellow immigrants.

The purpose of this project was to lay the groundwork for creating biographical video interviews of African-born artists in order to inspire other immigrants as well as promote Crocodile River Music. In order to achieve this goal, there were three main objectives that needed to be met: one, creating an index of these foreign-born persons, two, creating a prototype for a photoblog website, and three, offering a set of recommendations to Crocodile River Music, on how to expand and implement this project in the future.

### The Root of the Problem: Global Conflict

The rise of political violence, terrorism, and civil wars worldwide has led to an increase in the global population of refugees and immigrants. Africa has especially been exposed to these conflicts, leading to millions of people leaving their homes trying to escape and find a better life for themselves and their family.

### West Africa

There has been an increase in immigrants and refugees from countries in West Africa, due to a rise of conflicts in that region. [Figure 2]

A recent example of this is the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Boko Haram is a militant Islamist group that has been causing havoc through the country through waves of bombing, assassinations, and abductions. This disruption in Nigeria has displaced millions of people to neighboring countries. (Campbell & Harwood, 2018)

Other examples of hardships and adversities prevalent throughout West Africa include drug and human trafficking, piracy, and violent extremism. (Marc, Verjee, & Mogaka, 2015) These conflicts and issues have displaced many people from their homes. These displaced people either travel to a neighboring country in Africa or escape the continent as a whole and seek refuge elsewhere, with America being one of the most popular destinations worldwide.



Figure 2: West Africa. This image depicts the region of West Africa.

## Arriving in New England

America has experienced an increase of African refugees and immigrants, with a large portion relocating to New England. Massachusetts has seen a constant upward trend in the number of refugees and immigrants that have been relocating there. Annually, in 2011, only about 450 new refugees and immigrants had relocated to Massachusetts, but by 2015 and 2016 there were approximately 800 new refugees and immigrants relocating there. As of 2014, there was a total of 14,000 African refugee and immigrants living in Massachusetts. (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.)

## Worcester: A Resettlement City

Worcester is one of the state's top destinations for refugees and immigrants. As of 2016, 30% of the total amount of refugees entering Massachusetts resettled in Worcester. [Umassmed.edu] From the total number of African refugees that have entered Massachusetts, between 2007-2012, 23.4% have migrated to Worcester. As of 2013, 21% of Worcester's population was born abroad. (Barnes, 2015) In 2018, the population of African refugees and immigrants in Worcester was projected to be around 9,000.

## Refugee and Immigrant Programs in Worcester

There is an abundance of refugee and immigrant support programs and organizations that

are available in Worcester. These programs range from helping refugees and immigrants learn English, to assisting them socially and economically. A few examples of major refugee organizations in Worcester include the Refugee & Immigrant Assistance Center (RIAC), Refugee Artisans of Worcester (RAW) [Figure 3], Ascentria Care Alliance,



Figure 3: Refugee Artisans of Worcester (RAW) organization logo.

Worcester Alliance for Refugee Ministry (WARM) [Figure 4], Worcester Refugee Assistance Project (WRAP), Catholic Charities of Worcester County (CCWC), and African Community Education Program (ACE). Collectively these programs help



Figure 4: Worcester Alliance for Refugee Ministry (WARM) organization logo.

numerous refugees and immigrants resettle, provide access to affordable healthcare, English as a Secondary Language (ESL) Programs, employment services, transportation, and community education & outreach programs. (Abt et al. n.d.)

## Crocodile River Music

Our sponsor for this project was Crocodile River Music [Figure 5]. Crocodile River Music was established in 2011 by Zach Combs, who currently serves as its director. Combs was a recipient of the Watson Fellowship, a one year grant which enables people to independently and purposely travel around the world. He journeyed to Mali to explore the culture of West Africa. He fell in love with Mali's rich culture, particularly its music and dance, and was inspired to create Crocodile River Music. The main goal of Crocodile River is to give New England a taste of African Culture, while also providing opportunities to local artists from Africa. Eventually Combs was able to hire a number of employees in his effort to educate local residents about African culture. Over the years the team has expanded to include a diverse group of African artists, musicians, and educators. (Crocodile River Music, n.d.)



Figure 5: Crocodile River Music company logo.

## Spreading African Culture

As Crocodile River Music grew in size, schools and other groups in the community requested their services. At this time, the residency program was born. After forming a partnership with African Arts in Education in 2012, Crocodile River Music offered residency programs as a way to support various educational institutions in exposing their students to African culture. In addition to the residencies, Crocodile River Music also works with the Lankton Charitable Corporation and the Gallery of African art in order to host an African art exhibit at the school. The artwork they bring includes a wide variety of traditional instruments, masks, sculptures, and jewelry. At this time, these education programs are one of Crocodile River Music's main sources of revenue.

As part of the residency program, Crocodile River offers drum, dance, and STEAM (Science, Technology, Arts, and Math) workshops. In the drum workshops, the team brings in different kinds of traditional African drums and teaches the students proper rhythm and technique, as well as cooperation skills. [Figure 6] (Quist, 2017) The dance classes give the students an opportunity to dance with and learn from Crocodile River's own talented staff. Finally, the STEAM workshop teaches the students about the various different aspects involved with drums and the art of drumming. Students learn how to build a drum, how to play the drum, and the relationship between the drum sound and its size, shape, and material. (Crocodile River Music, n.d.)



Figure 6: Crocodile River Music Director Zach Combs. This image shows children participating in a drum workshop held by Crocodile River Music.

Outside of its educational programs, the Crocodile River Music team has also performed in many venues across New England. Each member has ties to a different country in Africa, adding a unique cultural diversity to their performances. The quartet known as "Vuelo" features Thierno Camara, a bassist, singer and composer from Senegal, Antoinette Mutuyimana, a percussionist, singer, and dancer from Tanzania, Idrissa Kone, a traditional drummer from Mali, and Ron Murray, a flamenco guitarist from the United States. Vuelo debuted at Mechanics Hall in Worcester and was



Figure 7: Djembe drums. Pictured here is a decorative wall display of djembe drums in the Crocodile River Music office in Worcester.

part of a live broadcast to the radio network WICN. (Crocodile River Music)

## Music of West Africa

Drumming is one of the fundamental cultural and recreational activities in West Africa. Drumming is most commonly used as a method of communication or for entertainment during cultural events. West African Communities perceive drumming as a crucial activity which they use to maintain their culture. (Govender, 2013)

There are different types of drums in West Africa. Each type of drum is unique in its own way and is used for various purposes. The djembe is a powerful hand drum made from wood with a goatskin cover and is very common in West Africa. [Figure 7] The djembe is slowly gaining worldwide recognition and is widely used in professional concerts across West Africa. (Gaudette, 2013) While the origin of the djembe is unknown, it is believed to have originated from the Susu and Mandinka blacksmiths and spread to other West African regions. The tama is a more traditional drum used in West African communities. It is used in a variety of occasions ranging from in the midst of wars to when prominent individuals in society want to summon their subordinates. (Gaudette, 2013)

A popular genre of music in West Africa is traditional gospel music. The West African gospel music scene is dominated by outstanding Nigerian musicians. In this regard, the name Sinach has become popular among Christian audiences in the continent of Africa. Sinach was born and raised in Nigeria and her songs such as "I Know who I am" have become a staple with Christian gatherings. Gospel music is defined by its deep use of symbolism that shows great reverence to God. However, a closer inspection of the general style of expression in gospel music reveals traces of the old ancestral worship. (Agordo, 2005) It is significant to note that unlike East, Central, and South African parts of the continent, the songs of most Nigerian gospel musicians is done in a smattering of English language.

The past decade has seen the rise in production of West African music that has redefined the music scene in Africa. Popular musicians such as "P Square," Wizkid, and Davido from Nigeria, Youssou N'Dour from Senegal, and a host of other artists have been instrumental in creating a new sound known as "Afropop." The Afropop sound has altered musical expression across Africa and influence musicians from nations like the Congo and Nigeria. Over the years, the sound has left the continent to influence musicians in both the United Kingdom and the U.S. There are various elements of West African music, like strong rhythmic beats, that make it enjoyable for audiences across the world. The Afropop genre of West African music is defined by dance and percussive sounds where the string and wind instruments play a key role in creating rhythm and tempo. (Collins, 2010) [Figures 8-9]

## Spreading West African Music

The West African music scene has a noticeable impact on the rest of the world. Historically, American music from African Americans has defined the evolution of global popular music. (Zmidzi & Munyaradzi, 2012) Some of the more popular genres of music developed in America by African Americans include rhythm and blues, jazz, swing, soul, and funk. Since African Americans consist of people who trace their roots mostly to West Africa, it is fair to deduce that much of American popular music can trace their origins to



Figure 8: African string instruments in the Crocodile River Music office in Worcester.

the musical traditions of various West African peoples. Genres such as Hip Hop and Spiritual music can be traced back to the hunter songs and

other work songs among the various ethnic groups of West Africa. However, over time, these genres evolved and the direct link with their origins across the Atlantic might not be so easily discernible to the less keen. The most important evidence of the influence that West African music has on global popular music was seen in the latest song by American musician Janet Jackson. Titled "Made for Now", the song bears a clear resemblance not only to the Afrobeat popularized in West Africa but also to the Benga music which has its roots in East and parts of Central Africa.

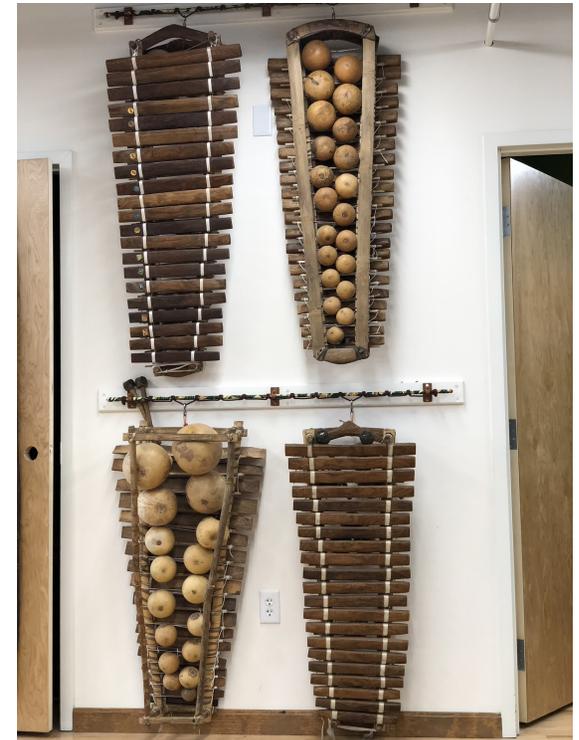


Figure 9: Pictured here are a few examples of a traditional African instrument, the balafon.

## Methodology: Promoting Cross-Cultural Acceptance with the *African Artist Initiative*

The purpose of this project was to lay the groundwork for creating biographical video interviews of African-born artists in order to inspire other immigrants as well as promote Crocodile River Music. We accomplished the following objectives to complete this project through five distinct deliverables.

**Objective One:** Create an index of contacts of the organizations and people to contact to find subjects for the photoblog website.

Our team contacted different refugee and immigrant organizations in Worcester via email, cold calls, and visiting their offices in person. We contacted Christine Brehany at RIAC, where she is their Preferred Communities Director. [Figures 10-11] Christine provided a few contacts that had ties to the African refugee community. One of the contacts she provided was Claud Amani, RIAC's head contact for the African refugee community. We interviewed Claud and learned more about his life and how he could help us contact potential subjects for the photoblog. Claud informed us that he had various contacts in the West African community that could be possible subjects for the project in the near future.



Figure 10: Pictured here is the Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center office in Worcester.

We also contacted Ellen Ferrante, the director at RAW. Ellen had a few people who could be potential subjects for the photoblog. Finally, our team contacted Kwame Bidi, the director at ACE. Although they work primarily with Central and East African refugees and immigrants, Kwame and ACE will be a great contact for a future iteration of this project, should Crocodile River Music decide to expand the scope of the project past West Africa. Each organization we contacted will be useful for Crocodile River Music for helping expand upon this project in the future.

### Objectives

### Methodologies

Create index of contacts ⇒ Structured Interviews

Create a prototype for photoblog website ⇒ Comparative Benchmarking and Focus group

Provide a set of recommendations for Crocodile River Music ⇒ SWOT Analysis



Figure 11: Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center company logo.

The first deliverable was an index of contacts, to include organizations and people. After contacting these different organizations, we compiled the contact information we received into an Excel file. This file contains the name, organization, email, phone number, and reason to contact for each entry.

**Objective Two:** Create a template and prototype for the photoblog website.

The first method we utilized was comparative benchmarking of a current popular photoblog website, Humans of New York. [Figure 12] We utilized comparative benchmarking in an effort to develop our website/interview process. [Figure 13] We analyzed two aspects of the photoblog: content and format.

After analyzing these two aspects of the Humans of New York photoblog, we made the following two conclusions. One, the format of Humans of New York was long and uninspiring. Two, one photo of the person was not an accurate

representation of their personality and life experiences. Therefore, we decided to film video interviews as a more effective representation of the interviewee's personality and emotions.

The second method employed was to conduct a focus group. The purpose of the focus group was to gather feedback from our sponsor regarding whether they preferred in video format versus written format. [Figure 14] We presented both formats and discussed the pros and cons of each with our sponsor. Shortly after this focus group, we decided to conduct the interviews in video format.

Our team realized that the pilot interview we conducted lacked professionalism and failed to capture the inspirational aspect we were hoping to portray. We concluded that we would create two separate interviews in video format for each person. One interview would be focused on music, while the second interview would be focused on their life story. Each interview would be accompanied by a short summary highlighting the key aspects of the interview.

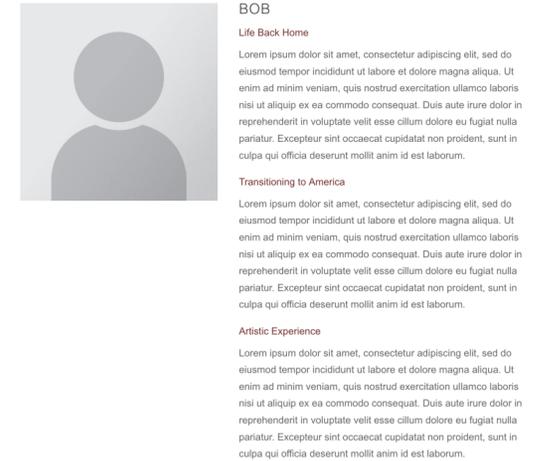


Figure 14: Pictured here is a mockup of a written interview summary on the prototype photoblog we created.

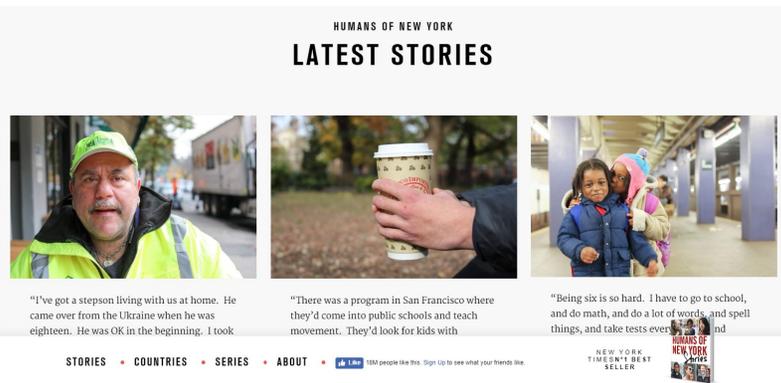


Figure 12: Humans of New York. This image depicts an example of a photoblog telling stories of people living in New York. (Humans of New York, n.d.)

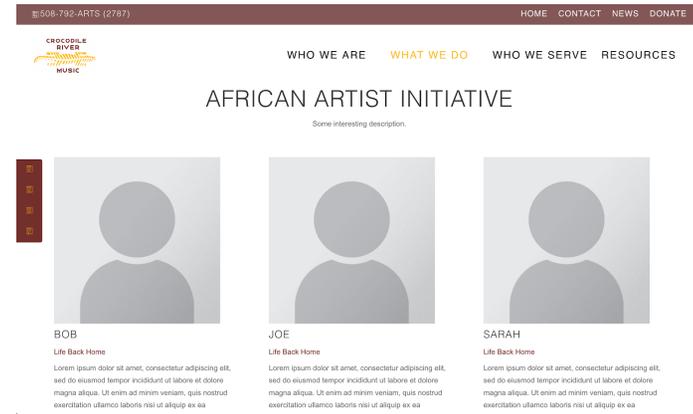


Figure 13: Photoblog template. Pictured here is an example of what the photoblog should look like on the Crocodile River Music website.

**Objective Three:** Provide a set of recommendations for Crocodile River Music.

The method we employed to complete this objective was a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. [Figure 15] We completed a SWOT analysis for each of the five recommendations we provided to our sponsor. These recommendations will allow Crocodile River Music to continue to expand and grow as an organization.

## Results: Creating Video Biographies

We decided that creating biographies in video format was the optimal style to highlight music in the lives of African immigrants. We interviewed two members of the Crocodile River Music team. These interviews served as templates for future interviews.

### Interview Practice

In order to ensure our interviewing skills were as sharp and polished as possible, we took part in some interview practice sessions with our advisor, Thomas Balistriero. [Figures 16-17] We spent multiple hours over the course of a week leading up to the day we conducted the final interviews. In these sessions, we problem solved for every aspect of the interview process. We brainstormed questions that would cover the

## SWOT ANALYSIS



Figure 15: Pictured here is the format for a SWOT analysis.

topics discussed in each interview. We decided to limit the interviews to specific time frames. It was very important to construct a set of questions that efficiently covered the topics of each interview.

Our team learned a number of different interviewing tactics, strategies, and skills in these sessions with our advisor. We brainstormed different methods regarding opening interviews, closing interviews, and various communication and listening skills. Each member of our team conducted practice interviews of the two separate interviews we planned to complete. While one member was role playing with our advisor, other team members observed the role play and provided feedback at its conclusion. We brainstormed what went well in the role play, what could be improved, and any suggestions we had for the person practicing their interview techniques.



Figure 16: Our team conducting interview practice with our advisor Tom Balistriero in the WPI Project Center.

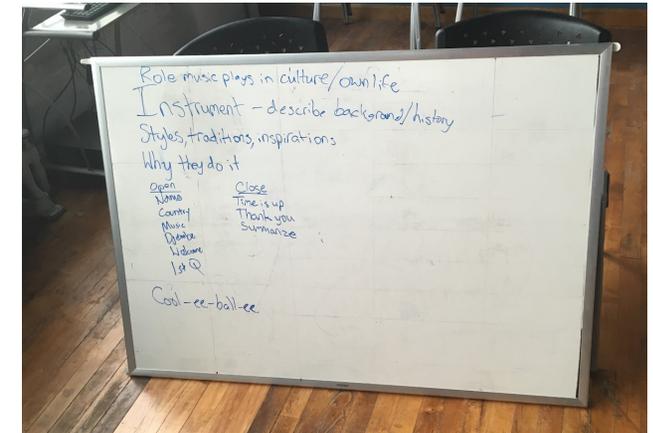


Figure 17: We used this whiteboard to monitor the information we wanted to talk about in each interview.

Another result of the interview practice was the realization that we needed to use two cameras. Our team brainstormed the optimal way to utilize the cameras and different camera angles in order to ensure the final product exhibited professionalism. We decided to have a main camera capturing both the interviewer and interviewee, and the second camera would be solely focused on the interviewee. The different angles among the cameras provided two sets of footage for our sponsors to choose from when constructing a final product for the project. This allows our sponsor the opportunity to create a final video summarizing the results of each interview, utilizing different camera angles, frames, and footage.

## Final Interviews

We conducted a set of interviews in video format with two members of the Crocodile River Music team, Issa Coulibaly and Antoinette Mutuyimana. Issa and Antoinette are both African immigrants and fit the mold of people in the target audience for this project. The purpose of these interviews was to illustrate the step-by-step process of how to create music and biographical video interviews for the photoblog.

The first interview touched on the importance of music in Issa and Antoinette's lives. The second interview detailed Issa and Antoinette's lives in their home countries and their transition to life in America.

Prior to starting the interviews, we setup cameras and props to ensure the interview process was efficient and professional. We utilized two cameras, two tripods, a directional mic, and lapel mics from the Academic Technology Center (ATC) at WPI. The standard setup of each interview included one main camera focused on both the interviewer and the interviewee. The other camera was focused solely on the interviewee. (Figure 18) The two different camera angles will assist our sponsors in creating a professional documentary using clips of the footage from these interviews. Issa and Antoinette both wore a lapel mic on their shirts to ensure we could hear their responses clearly. We felt it was most important for viewers to be able to hear what Issa and Antoinette were saying. The lapel mics ensured that was possible. A directional mic was placed on the main camera in order to detect our voices as well. We used a whiteboard as a



Figure 19: Pictured here is Teddy interviewing Issa Coulibaly.

prop to list key topics we wanted to discuss. The whiteboard served as a resource for the interviewer to monitor and ensure each topic was discussed. We felt that this standard setup was the most efficient and professional way to complete these video interviews.

The first person we interviewed was Issa. We conducted a 10 minute interview focused on the role music plays in his life. [Figure 19] Issa is a master djembe player, so we focused on his drumming. We discussed the role that music played in his native culture in Mali and in his personal life, his inspirations and motivations for drumming, and some history behind his instrument, the djembe. Issa also played a 30 second song at the end of the interview that was popular in his native culture.



Figure 18: Pictured here is Nick interviewing Issa Coulibaly in the Crocodile River Music office.



Figure 20: More interview footage with Issa in the Crocodile River Music office in Worcester.

successful life in America. It was very enlightening to hear what Issa had to say about the various hardships he faced in his childhood. It was inspiring to see how Issa persevered to overcome past hardships and is now taking steps to establish a successful life in the United States.

After we finished the interviews with Issa, we conducted the same two interviews with Antoinette. Antoinette has a strong passion for dancing and teaching others to dance. In the music interview we tailored our questions to highlight these passions. We began by discussing music in her native culture in Tanzania and how music affected her life personally. We focused a large portion of the interview on where she draws inspirations and motiva-



Figure 22: Antoinette Mutuyimana demonstrating steps of a traditional African dance during her music interview.

The message we attempted to capture with this interview was how Issa's passion for music has influenced his life. It was very uplifting to see the way Issa's face lit up while demonstrating the song for us. It was evident during the interview that Issa loved playing the djembe, teaching others, and sharing his passion for music and drumming with viewers.

Next, we conducted the in-depth interview with Issa. This interview focused on his life growing up in Mali and his transition to life in the United States. [Figure 20] The duration of this interview was about 30-35 minutes. We constructed questions to learn about Issa's experiences in Mali and America. We hoped to portray how Issa has been able to persevere and overcome early hardships in his life and establish a



Figure 21: Xavier interviewing Antoinette in the Crocodile River Music office.

tion from when dancing. We really wanted to illustrate her passion for dance and make it evident to viewers of the interview. At the conclusion of this interview, Antoinette demonstrated the steps of a traditional dance that was popular in her culture in Tanzania. [Figure 22]

Next, we conducted the in-depth interview with Antoinette discussing her life in Tanzania, her transition to America, success, and future aspirations. [Figure 21] The message we were looking to portray was how Antoinette overcame hardships faced in her childhood and her success in adapting to life in America.

During this in-depth interview, we learned about life and culture in Tanzania, her experience with the immigration process in the United States, and adjustments to life that were especially difficult. One of the most interesting aspects of her life was how Antoinette arrived in the U.S. with her family when she was a teenager. She struggled adjusting to life in America, especially in school, where she was an outsider and was often bullied for being different. It was uplifting to hear how proud Antoinette was to have overcome these challenges at such a young age and establish a successful life in America. In the future, she aspires to own a dance studio where she can share her love and passion for music and dance. We were inspired by her courage, her passion for music and dance, and her willingness to make a difference in the community. [Figure 23]



Figure 23: Xavier interviewing Antoinette in the Crocodile River Music office.



Figure 24: Backstage shot of a Crocodile River Music performance.

After we completed the final interviews, our team discussed the results. We brainstormed what went well and what could have been improved. We noticed that demonstrations of Issa and Antoinette's art forms were vital components of the interview. These demonstrations provided viewers visual evidence of Issa and Antoinette's passion and love for music.

We filmed these interviews in the Crocodile River Music office. The footage for the interviews with Issa and the footage for the interviews with Antoinette served as the second and third deliverables for this project.

## Concert Footage

The fourth deliverable for this project was raw footage of four Crocodile River Music concerts. The purpose of gathering this footage was to provide our sponsor with material to create a short documentary about music and cross-cultural acceptance in the community. To complete this deliverable, our team attended four separate Crocodile River Music performances. Our team attended the first performance to observe from the crowd and examine the atmosphere and energy created by the team performing. Prior to the next performance we met with our sponsor and our advisor and decided to utilize these performances. We decided that we would film the next three concerts and hand the footage to our sponsors as a deliverable for future creation of a video documentary. [Figures 24-25]



Figure 25: Pictured here is Dylan filming one of Crocodile River Music's performances at Worcester State University.

For the first concert that we filmed, we arranged a stationary camera on a tripod that captured the whole stage for the entirety of the show. After further analysis of the footage and brainstorming with our sponsors, we decided to add another camera for non-stationary shots and close-up shots of the different team members performing.

At the next performance we utilized two cameras. We filmed the performance with one stationary camera along with a member of our team maneuvering throughout the crowd and venue capturing action shots, crowd shots, and close-ups. Post-performance, we reviewed the footage with our liaisons in an effort to improve camera work and footage for the upcoming performances we planned on filming.



Figure 26: Dylan gathering more on-stage footage at a Crocodile River Music performance.

In the fourth and final performance, two members of our team traveled throughout the venue and onstage capturing various action shots, crowd reactions, and close-up shots of the performers. [Figures 26-27] The purpose of capturing these non-stationary shots was to provide footage for cutaway scenes and b-roll for a possible documentary.



Figure 27: Pictured here is Teddy onstage capturing footage of a performance at Worcester State University.



Figure 28: Pictured here is our team with Antoinette Mutuyimana.

## Recommendations

The fifth deliverable for this project was the following set of recommendations.

1. We recommend that interviewers receive training before conducting interviews.
2. We recommend that two separate interviews be conducted with each subject. The first interview focusing on the personal life of the subject. The second interview focusing on the artistic life of the subject.
3. We recommend that Crocodile River Music creates a documentary utilizing the footage recorded at their performances.
4. We recommend that Crocodile River Music maintain professional relationships with RIAC, ACE, RAW, and other organizations in Worcester.
5. We recommend Crocodile River Music maintain a relationship with WPI with the prospect of working with another IQP team.

## Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their support in the execution and success of this project.
- Our advisor, Thomas J. Balistreri, for his continued support and advising us throughout the duration of this project.
- Our sponsor, Zach Combs, and the rest of the team at Crocodile River Music for guiding our project and providing valuable assistance to complete this project.
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- WPI Global Lab in the Foisie Innovation Studio at WPI, specifically James Monaco, and Karen Royer for providing video editing training and support of the project.
- The Academic Technology Center at WPI for providing cameras, mics, and continued support in an efficient and timely manner.
- Worcester Polytechnic Institute for providing us the opportunity to complete this project at the Worcester Community Project Center.

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