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Smithsonian Institution  
Traveling Exhibition Service

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**Faces and Stories of Immigration Explored in New Smithsonian Traveling  
Photography Exhibition**

*-At the Oregon Historical Society, March 20, 2010-*

*“My parents’ sole reason to emigrate from Barbados to the United States was to give my brother and me more opportunities and a better life. They have made many sacrifices, and I hope to make them proud and never let them down.” — Ishmael Alleyne, age 17*

Alleyne is one of 59 teenagers who participated in photographer Barbara Beirne’s study of recent immigrants’ experiences. In a new traveling exhibition from the Smithsonian, black-and-white photo-interviews—photographic portraits captioned by the subjects’ own words—offer a thought-provoking starting point for exploring immigration, acculturation and cultural diversity.

“Becoming American: Teenagers & Immigration” will premiere in Portland, OR on March 20, 2010 at the Oregon Historical Society. It will be on view through May 30. Developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the exhibition will travel around the country on a national tour through 2011.

“The young people presented in this exhibit give evidence that America, the land of immigrants, continues to attract courageous newcomers seeking freedom and opportunities,” stated Beirne. “These teenagers, who have struggled with the difficulties that accompany enormous change, bring with them the strength and determination needed to become an essential part of their adopted land. I look forward to watching their futures unfold.”

Beirne’s images capture first-generation immigrants and children of immigrants, revealing a diverse array of teenage responses to the immigrant experience. By photographing her subjects in their own communities—on a basketball court, at a place of worship, in a

parent's shop, at school and within their homes—she presents sensitive portraits, which give viewers an opportunity to better understand the complexity of the newcomers' lives.

The accompanying narratives bring a vivid reality to the immigrant experience. Some stories are brimming with optimism: "Now I can go to school. This country is good," proclaims Diana Ingabire, 15. Other comments reflect the hardships of being culturally different: "After the terrible events at the World Trade Center," 16-year-old Sohale Mehrmanesh muses, "I'm afraid that all Arab people will be suspected of terrorism." Many of the teens offer poignant observations about their new country. "I was surprised that there were so many homeless people living in this city. How could this happen in America?" asks Guinea native Mawa Fofana, 17.

Beirne's interest in immigration began in 1999 with a photography assignment to document Kosovar Albanian refugees airlifted from overcrowded camps in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to military housing at Fort Dix, New Jersey. In time, Beirne managed to make friends with a few Kosovars who were relieved to find sanctuary in America, but the photographer admits that she was "overwhelmed with concern" about the immigrants' uncertain futures in the United States. One by one, the newcomers moved out of the camp, leaving Beirne to ponder how they would adapt to life in this country. Attempting to answer that question and document the shared hopes and challenges of these youths, Beirne began interviewing and photographing immigrant teenagers from countries around the world

Barbara Beirne has worked as a documentary photographer for more than 25 years. She has photographed in Belfast, Northern Ireland, India, Nepal and Ecuador. Her photographs have been widely exhibited in museums and galleries. Among her projects in the United States are photographs of women in Southern Appalachia. The images were featured in the well-received SITES exhibition "Serving Home and Community: Women of Southern Appalachia." Beirne holds a masters degree in photography from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

### **About the Oregon Historical Society**

The Society has served since 1898 as Oregon's primary research collection and museum about Oregon history. OHS has an extensive collection of historical pieces, including over 85,000 artifacts and 3 million photographs and films. It safeguards and presents Oregon's history through a museum, research library, traveling exhibits, school programs and website content.

### **About SITES:**

SITES has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for more than 50 years. SITES connects Americans to their shared cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science and history, which are shown wherever people live, work and play. Exhibition descriptions and tour schedules are available at [www.sites.si.edu](http://www.sites.si.edu).

*Becoming American: Teenagers & Immigration, Photographs by Barbara Beirne*, was organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES).