

# Boise: A Model of a Welcoming City

*Imanol Galdos Irazabal*

## **Introduction: A humble tribute to my parents**

The reason I am here today talking about the model of Boise as a welcoming city is, quite simply, because my parents (Miguel and Tere) gave a great welcome to the group from Boise that came to Oñati back in 1974. This is the image that best represents my life cycle. It is the plaque placed in Boise's Memorial Park two years ago to coincide with the *Jaialdi* of 2015, in gratitude for the great work my parents did by welcoming people from Boise in difficult times. For many years my home in Oñati was like a small hotel that was the scene of the story I am going to tell you now. Obviously, this story does not explain the whole model I want to show you today. However, it is clearly a central part of a wonderful story that is being written now, in a very difficult context. A finer point and a rectification: Cities, towns, villages and countries are not welcoming in themselves. Their people are, although not everyone. They are usually courageous people who, in difficult circumstances, and often on their own against the opinion of the majority, decide to take very tricky paths. We tend to jump on the bandwagon of success too easily, while in many cases we have been part of the problem. Historic memory is

essential to understand the present, and to structure the story of the future.

The real and anonymous heroes are the people who created the conditions for Boise to become an authentic reference for those of us who believe in spaces where people from different social, language, political, ethnical and religious backgrounds can construct authentic models of harmonious coexistence; forward-looking visionary individuals who take risks, and – above all – very generous people. Those who courageously opted for this way forward in the past and now deserve a lot of respect.

Although everything seems to be called into question nowadays, the future will surely involve models along the lines of Boise. There is no other way. They are the cities we all aspire to, hence their enormous potential and attractiveness. Homogeneous cities that turn their backs on new energies are doomed.

## **The beginning: 1974**

Pat Bieter, the father of the current Mayor of Boise, was a man ahead of his time. Born in Minnesota, he was posted to Boise for military service, and that is where he discovered the large Basque community in Idaho. A university professor of Irish descent who was familiar with the reality

of the Irish diaspora to the United States, he understood how important it was for the new generations of Basque Americans to learn about the contemporary reality of Euskadi, now very different to the country that their ancestors had left behind years before. This led to the academic program aimed at North American university studies that set out (beyond the learning and improvement of language skills in the Basque and Spanish languages as well as other teachings on different aspects of life in Euskadi) to provide better knowledge of the reality of the Basques at a time when Franco was still in power.

Oñati, the town where I was born and grew up, was chosen by the Universities of Boise and Reno to begin the program that has changed the way relations between Euskadi and the Basque diaspora that are understood, basically in the United States. A new paradigm of relations was born. Everything that has happened since cannot be understood without considering the importance of this program. It was organized in Oñati for around seven years, making it possible for hundreds of North American students to get to know the reality of the Basques and, above all, enabling hundreds of relationships between people from both sides of the Atlantic (marriages, divorces, families, some living here and others there). In 1982, the program was transferred to Donostia under the umbrella of the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC).

Franco was in power and Euskadi was a volcano waiting to explode, at a time of great political upheaval. In this context, that first group of students headed by Pat Bieter certainly did not receive a warm welcome. They arrived protected by the Guardia Civil and the reception

was hostile. Many people in Oñati (in line with the majority opinion in Basque society) thought that they were a cover for the CIA – that is, allies of Franco. Great courage was shown by my parents and others (people involved in political opposition to Franco and very committed to the defense of Basque language and culture), and very few decided to welcome the Americans who arrived in Oñati with open arms. Thanks to their courage, I am standing here today explaining the welcoming nature of Boise. Likewise, the strong commitment and courage of Pat Bieter should be highlighted. He was a man who knew how to anticipate events in a conservative environment. Those young people who stayed in Oñati are now community leaders in Boise: the Mayor, judges, doctors, university professors. Therefore, we should highlight the great impact the project had on the development of the city of Boise.

Everyone emerged as a winner from that program. Oñati, a historically outward-looking town (it is home to the oldest university in the Basque Country, where Law, Medicine and Philosophy were taught in the 16<sup>th</sup> century), is now an even more open place, and the role played by the Boise program has been a key factor. Boise and Oñati are, as we shall see in more detail later, isolated places, although in both cases far from being a drawback this has been a key factor in their success. There was no resting on one's laurels; isolation has been a stimulus.

Oñati has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the Spanish State, with companies like ULMA operating worldwide, the International Institute for the Sociology of Law that welcomes Doctorate and Master's students from all over the

world, and the Monastery of Arantzazu. From that dark year 1974 to now, Oñati and Boise have grown and helped each other, thanks to those courageous people who took great risks and decided that the future of their hometown and their people meant being open towards other cultures and other ways of thinking. The commitment to diversity is the only driving force that makes societies growing, and Boise is a clear example.

### **Boise: In the middle of nowhere**

My first visit to Boise was in 1988. We had to take quite a few flights to get there. As happens with a lot of other places in the world (Donostia and Husum come to mind), being located outside the main routes with not particularly good communications theoretically means greater difficulties. My first impression was that is a small city. Very different from the large city concept that seems to be imposing itself nowadays. In the case of Boise, however, what some consider a major drawback, with the often-repeated complaint about it being far away from where things happen – “Boise is in the middle of nowhere” – its unfavorable location, its dry climate, roasting sunshine in summer, and quite a cold winter – what some consider defects turn into undoubted advantages.

In the middle of the desert, with vast spaces around and infinite potential for growth, Boise has become home to state-of-the-art technology companies, people looking for new life experiences, refugees and emigrants in search of freedom. Micron, Hewlett-Packard and White-Cloud Analytics have converted Boise into a ‘Techy Boomtown’, as TIME magazine described it. In March 2014, TIME Magazine featured Boise as #1 region “Getting

it Right”. As they explain in their feature called Red-Hot Town,

#1 Boise, Idaho: Once the gateway to remote mining camps, Idaho’s capital has become a technic boomtown with a thriving cultural scene. An economy boosted by mega-grocer Albertsons, the multinational Micron Technology and the potato giant J.R. Simplot has helped jump-start a fast-growing real estate market.

From all perspectives and angles, Boise’s ability to attract is undisputed. The city has become the incarnation of the American Dream of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on its own merits. With a population of 676,929 (2015 Estimate), there are more than 101,800 people employed in professional services occupations. One of the fastest growing regions in the country, the Boise MSA ranked #3 (excluding Florida) for the highest net domestic in-migration rate in 2014 behind Austin, TX and Charleston, SC.<sup>1</sup> As well as technology companies and North American citizens in search of new experiences or simply tired of living in large cities (20% of new residents in Boise have come from California), Boise’s rather isolated location has not stopped thousands of refugees from starting a new life there. On paper, other destinations might seem more attractive to those who have chosen Boise, or who arrived in a little-known place as a result of established quotas. They all praise the city that is now their home.

Boise, Idaho, offers a calmer perspective. Here at the base of the Rocky Mountains, in one of the whitest of American places in one of the

reddest American states, 13,000 refugees from at least 53 countries are rebuilding their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Many different factors, causes and reasons, and the need to overcome major obstacles (location, stereotypes<sup>3</sup>), led the city authorities to adopt a rather unconventional project by discarding traditional approaches. Nowadays, however, the project has all the elements to become a model that transcends the frontiers of the USA. In an age of uncertainty, upheaval, doubts, questions and generalized fatigue, Boise proposes something very suggestive, unusual and attractive, despite its location in the middle of the desert. Proximity is important for many small to mid-sized cities. Not all amenities generally exist within the city limits, which is fair. Not every city can be New York City. It's rare to hear a mayor say that one aspect that makes his city so great is how far removed it is from other cities.

Yet, that's exactly what Boise's mayor David Bieter suggested. "I think our isolation has been good for us," he says. "Salt Lake City, Portland and Seattle are six to eight hours away. You can't drive an hour and go the symphony or theater in another town. You have to build it here". Boise, therefore, needs to provide for itself. It has the Boise Philharmonic. It has a theater. It has a state capital and a military base. Its university has added "football powerhouse" to its already-impressive resume. The natural amenities are perhaps even more impressive than the cultural ones. Boise sits at the intersection of desert and mountains with the Boise

River running through downtown. The climate is mild year-round, but still varied throughout the year. "Unless you don't like seasons," Mayor Bieter says, "we're a very good place to live." The isolation can be a downside, too. Getting people to Boise can be a challenge. The city must be an intentional destination. It is not really on the way to or from anywhere. But once people see it, they tend to fall in love and want to stay, Mayor Bieter says.<sup>4</sup>

### **Why is Boise attractive?**

It is paradoxical that, at a time when there is a tendency towards retreat and the challenging of open, integrating approaches depending on the flow of events, the great driver behind Boise is its diversity. Without a doubt, this is what makes it so attractive. There are also other elements to explain the meteoric rise and growth of Boise. It is a city whose population has increased from 74,990 in 1970 to 102,249 in 1980 and to 216,282 in 2014. Its present population is 223,154, just a little bigger than Donostia. The reasons that could explain this spectacular growth lead us to analyze them one by one. It is a long list, for sure. According to a study made by Boise Metro: "Reasons for Growth? 1) Quality of Life – Live the American Dream, Own a Home; 2) Affordability w/ Premium Schools, Recreation, Safety; 3) Quality of People; 4) Vibrant Downtown."<sup>5</sup> Quality education is another key factor in the major immigrant flow into Boise that is taking place. Mayor Bieter says:

Many of the schools in town are highly rated, which helped Boise rank on our Top 10 Best Cities for Kids list. In our discussion with

business that is looking to relocate, they always ask about the educational system. Our advantage is that our public-school system is the default school. We have private schools that are quite good, but you choose them if you want to, not because you have to. The classrooms are diverse, due to a large population of refugees from all over the world.<sup>6</sup>

Seen from the outside, and in the light of stereotypes, nobody who is not from the Boise Valley could imagine diversity as its main feature when it comes to describing the place.<sup>7</sup>

More than 90 different languages are spoken in the Boise School District. The Boise Valley is home to one of the oldest synagogues in the western United States. 800 new citizens seeking refuge from circumstances in their homeland are welcomed to the Boise Valley each year from over 20 foreign countries. Idaho is home to the second largest Basque population in North America. Over 70% of the population has some college training or above (12.7% above the national average).

The Boise Valley is home to the fastest-growing community college in the country, College of Western Idaho, which is currently servicing over 20,000 students. The Boise Valley maintains a wealth of cultural, spiritual and ethnic diversity throughout the area, and is proud to actively promote and foster a spirit of inclusion that embraces the diversity found in the valley. From cultural events such as the Soul Food Ex-

travaganza to the San Inazio Festival or Deli Days, to ongoing activities and programs at the Black History Museum and the Hispanic Cultural Center, the Boise Valley celebrates our residents' diversity year-round. In any event, the favorable position held by Boise in most rankings is a clear sign of:

1. A Getaway: Boise was ranked as one of the top five "Best Travel-Worthy State Capitals" by USA Today for 2016.

2. A Recreation Paradise: Boise was named one of the 10 "Best Big Cities for Active Families" by Outside Magazine.

3. A Cultural Hub: Boise recently nabbed the #2 spot as one of the "Most Artistic Mid-Sized Cities in America".

4. An Economic Powerhouse: Boise was named on the top ten lists of cities with job growth potential.

5. A Downtown Trendsetter: Livability ranked BoDo as #6 in their list of "Top 10 Downtown Scenes".

6. A Growing Market: Boise has been repeatedly named as one of the "Hottest Housing Markets" for 2016.

7. A Caring Community: Not only was Boise recently chosen as the "Most Caring City in America", it also ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in the nation for volunteerism and community outreach.

8. A Green Oasis: An analysis of thirteen different eco-conscious metrics ranked Boise in the "Top 20 Greenest American Cities".

9. An Educational Leader: Boise has been repeatedly ranked as a top ten college town, among other accolades.

10. 2017's Best -Worst-Run Cities

in America.<sup>8</sup>

11. Best cities for raising a family<sup>9</sup>, with Boise in second place.

12. Boise also ranks #2 as an “Up and Coming City for New Grads”, and as one of TIME Magazine’s “Best Towns for College Football”.

Regardless of any classification, Boise represents the future. It is a new city without prejudices or baggage, a unique energy and a natural setting that is an essential element in a very attractive project. Its inhabitants show much greater pride in the city than those from other places.<sup>10</sup> What used to be an insignificant city is now seen as one of the great benchmarks for the future. It has found its place despite all the difficulties that it has experienced (and still does). In this process, a clear, generous and unequivocal commitment to the enthusiastic welcoming of diversity has been, without doubt, what has placed it in such a favorable situation. Its success is based on a set of intangible values that comprise a unique model: pride, an outward-looking approach, diversity, happiness. That is where we need to look to carry out any analysis:

*The Best City in America is Actually Right Here in Idaho*

The old adage of “location, location, location” is just one reason why Idaho as a whole has been recently making headlines as a blossoming national icon. The Gem State’s idyllic intersection of desert, mountains and river oases creates an environment that offers something for everybody, while also quietly resting in close proximity to the urban centers of

Seattle, Portland, and Salt Lake City. But Idaho’s capital is making a name for itself for much more than its beauty and convenience.

With the goal of becoming the most livable city in the country, Boise is a bustling metropolis that has changed dramatically in the past decade or so, rising from a “bait and bullet” town, as it was called by the *New York Times*, to a thriving center for art, green initiatives, and community development. But it is in its uniquely isolated setting that Boise has truly found its niche as a hip, urban hub that is being praised by nearly every nationally published top ten list.

Idaho is a one-of-a-kind haven all on its own, but Boise as a blossoming metropolis offers everything you could ask for in a modern community – superb dining, quality education, entrepreneurial initiative, and so much more.

But Boise does so without the high cost of living, over-development, or pollution that one finds in its more populated urban counterparts. Whether it is the City of Trees’ unique festivals, incredible art scene, or vibrant nightlife, Boise is a fantastic place to visit or call home.<sup>11</sup>

### **A long history of welcoming: Refugees transform the City of Trees**

It would be wrong to say that the path has been strewn with flowers. Resistance has existed, and still does in places. The polarization that western societies suffer nowadays does not help to create a calm debate. The natural, necessary and desirable diversity of opinions is often

replaced by exaggeration, manipulation and over-generalization.<sup>12</sup> There is another important nuance: the deliberate confusion of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘immigrant’<sup>13</sup> does not help to mark out and clarify the debate.

History repeats itself, as Dave Bieter reminded us in an article published in December 2016<sup>14</sup>, in which he strongly defended his position. From a historical perspective, he highlighted the benefits that the presence of immigrants and refugees has represented in Boise’s growth. Mayor Bieter, who considers himself an outsider, a Catholic in a Protestant city and a Democrat in a Republican state, is a good example of a typical life journey in Boise today:

I’m the mayor of Boise, where immigrants have played a significant role since before statehood.

My own life is an example of how the immigration experience in the United States has worked. My grandfather immigrated to Boise from the Basque region of Spain in 1912, along with thousands of others. He herded sheep – tough, solitary work that few native-born Americans wanted. He met my grandmother, another Basque immigrant, here in Boise and they built a life for my mother and her two sisters.

Their story was similar to those of thousands of Basques who succeeded in Idaho. Today, it is easy to forget that in 1909 a local newspaper described Basque immigrants as “filthy, treacherous, and meddlesome, clanish and undesirable”. Fortunately, most Idahoans ignored that.

Thousands of Latino immigrants

have pursued similar paths through hard, unpopular work on the road to better lives in the Boise Valley. Like Basque immigrants to Idaho, Latinos have not always faced an easy road. As late as the 1950s, signs posted outside some doors in the area warned “Mexicans, Negroes, Jews, Indians and dogs” to stay out. Again, fortunately, most Idahoans ignored that. The Latino contribution to our lives is unmistakable. Without them, many of Idaho’s most important industries would have collapsed long ago.

And so it is today with refugees. Boise is home to Bosnians, Somalis, Iraqis and Syrians. Our city government reaches out through nearly all departments – police to ensure refugees know they are safe; parks and recreation programs help refugee children enjoy our outdoors, like all our children do; library programs help with access to computers and other learning tools; our arts and history programs help with cultural activities. We offer these same programs to all Boiseans. We do not debate about who is more worthy or where they’re from. We are a welcoming city. We all have work to do. Refugees enrich our city. They are some of the hardest working Boiseans. They give vibrancy to our schools. Some have even opened new businesses in older parts of Boise. Our city gets back many times over what it gives.

Boise does not welcome our newcomers just out of goodwill and the bottom line. We also do so because we understand that the constant

addition of new and energized people from many places around the world is this country's oxygen. That does not mean things are easy.

But the United States has never taken the easy route, through wars and depressions and the shifting world – and that's why we are the United States. From our city's beginnings in the 1860s, Boise has benefited from the energy and hard work of its newcomers from all over the globe. It would be a mistake to shut that off.<sup>15</sup>

The journey has been a long one and not without its difficulties, similar to those that still prevail, far from unanimity, and that gives the present scenario even more value. Opposing stances that have propitiated a process that has always been alive:

Both an in-migrant city and an anti-in-migrant city, Boise, historically, had shunned prejudice but also endorsed it depending on what was at stake. In 1893, the Japanese laborers who laid rails to the 10<sup>th</sup> Street depot were confined to shiver in box cars when threatened by mobs downtown. In 1901, a Bavarian in-migrant mayor named Moses Alexander allied with a British sheriff to roughly remove the Chinese. That same immigrant built an ornate synagogue and became the nation's first elected Jewish governor. Boise beckoned, but Boiseans sometimes repelled.<sup>16</sup>

Pitchfork nativism, even so, never played well in Boise. In 1924, when the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan rallied on Boise's Main Street, the city council insisted that

the hooded marchers expose their faces in honest daylight. In 1948, when an Idaho senator shunned "whites only" and was arrested in Alabama, Boiseans applauded the rebuke of Jim Crow. Today, like a hundred years ago, different visions and approaches exist on the issue, as Professor Todd Shallat points out:

Idaho's governor had previously joined two dozen others in demanding a halt to "rubber-stamped" immigration/refugee programs. No matter the confusion between refugees (who are forced to migrate) and in-migrants (who are not). No matter that refugee issues were far removed from the governor's jurisdiction. "Frustration runs high in Idaho", said Otter. The narrative seemed to confirm that strangers were evil and that refugee resettlement was a top spun out of control.

Two blocks from Otter's Statehouse – shouting distance but political light-years from the governor's office – Mayor David H. Bieter ignited his own fiery headline by drafting a defiant response. "When it comes to immigration and refugees," wrote Bieter to his fellow mayors, "Presidents and Congress get to say, but mayors have to do".

Boise's mayor rejected the notion that people from distant places posed a threat to public safety. Boise was live-and-let live, said Bieter. It was the kind of place where artists painted the utility-boxes, where an overpass sheltered a skate park, where motorists allowed people to merge so long as they waved back to acknowledge the kindness. "We are nationally



known as a welcoming city”, Bieter continued, “We can all be proud”.<sup>17</sup>

The debate is ongoing, but the commitment has been made in Idaho for a long time. There is a deeply-rooted culture that is interiorized and assumed by its institutions, civil society, and citizens:

In Idaho meanwhile, an informal refugee program began at Boise State University in 1975, and Governor John Evans formally established a state-level refugee center in 1979. The program later passed to Idaho’s Department of Health and Welfare in 1997, to a private nonprofit, Jannus Inc., named in tribute to the Roman god of new beginning. It houses the resettlement agency. The Idaho Office for Refugees (within Jannus) receives federal grant money and administers statewide programs.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of each war, given its status as a sanctuary<sup>19</sup>, Idaho is one of over 200 resettlement communities across the U.S. providing safe haven to refugees from war-torn countries across the world; Boise has welcomed citizens from all over the world, most of whom did not know it existed. People from Indochina, Vietnam, Korea, Somalia, the Congo, Syria or Iraq<sup>20</sup> are among those who have rebuilt their lives in Boise and Idaho. Let’s mention only a few countries of origin and numbers for Idaho refugees from 2016: Democratic Republic of Congo (602), Syria (148), and Iraq (122).

The war in the Balkans led to the arrival of another large wave of refugees from Bosnia, possibly one of the communities with the greatest impact on the area in

recent years. Very few of them could tell you where Idaho was on the map. Around 3,500–4,000 people<sup>21</sup> (mostly Bosnians, with small communities of Serbians and Croatians) make up a highly vibrant and enterprising community, particularly in the construction sector and as university professors. The story of Refik Sadikovic shows the importance of an experience that has allowed him to work a personal miracle that has enriched Boise. Mutual enrichment and benefit: “Chosen to Survive. A Bosnian, cut down by shrapnel, sees his life as a miracle”.<sup>22</sup>

In Donostia, the city where I live, the number of Bosnians arriving in the city can be counted on one hand; not even a dozen. They have integrated wonderfully, and I often wonder why our ability to attract people like that is so low. With just a quarter of those who arrived in Boise, Donostia would undoubtedly have been a much more enriched city. Boise’s example should make us sit up and think.

Regardless of the particular circumstances and the (worthy) opinions that exist on the subject, Boise continues on its way. There will be turbulences, quota reductions, some hiatus, but it will be difficult to stop something that belongs to the DNA of the city and its citizens.<sup>23</sup>

In 2014, Full Circle Exchange launched a new “Job Readiness” program in Boise. It assists local refugees and women in transition by providing immediate income and developing daily hands-on skills such as team-building, problem-solving, language acquisition, and vital enrichment opportunities needed to overcome barriers to employment; creating a new future – for them-

selves, their families, our community and our economy. [...] Nearly 6,000 people from 35 countries call Boise their home.<sup>24</sup>

### **A shared public-private initiative**

The community of Boise, Idaho has made a commitment to welcoming refugees through its impressive Refugee Resource Strategic Community Plan. EMM's affiliate partners at the Agency for New Americans have partnered with city agencies, transportation officials, health care providers and many other stakeholders to adopt a model of communication and creative problem-solving that is benefiting the entire community. A program that teaches refugees how to drive is just one of many positive offshoots to emerge from this collaboration. What has given Boise its undisputed status as a benchmark?

#### *25 Communities Selected for Gateways for Growth Challenge Round II*

Building on the increasing demand from local government, business, and civic leaders who aim to develop concrete strategies to integrate immigrants and foster economic growth, New American Economy (NAE) and Welcoming America are pleased to announce the 25 communities who will receive Gateways for Growth award in the second year of the initiative.

Launched in December 2015, the Gateways for Growth Challenge are a competitive opportunity for local communities to receive direct technical assistance from New American Economy and Welcoming America to develop multi-sector plans for

welcoming and integrating immigrants. New American Economy also provides tailored research on the contributions of immigrants and matching grants to select communities as part of the Challenge.

This year's Gateways for Growth awardees demonstrated a strong commitment from local government, business, and civil society partners to recognize and highlight the contributions immigrants are making – by bolstering population growth, increasing the tax base, starting new businesses and creating jobs, and adding vibrancy and culture to our social fabric – and to develop concrete strategies and recommendations to maximize these contributions.

“While Congress debates the value of immigration, in city after city, the evidence is already in – immigrants revive neighborhoods and drive economic growth,” said John Feinblatt, President of New American Economy. “The Gateways for Growth Challenge offers local leaders blueprints for attracting immigrant talent and jump-starting their economies.”

“These communities are leaders in the broader and growing trend to be more inclusive, offering an alternative to the divisive rhetoric around immigration and showing how inclusion is good for our economy, neighborhoods, and future,” said David Lubell, Executive Director of Welcoming America. “Inclusive economic growth strategies that take into account both U.S. and foreign-born communities make cities more vibrant, attractive places for all residents.

Following a rigorous application process, 25 communities were selected: Alexandria, VA, Austin, MN, and Boise/Ada County, ID [...]. This year, the Gateways for Growth Challenge will again offer resources to communities that demonstrate a public-private commitment to the development of a community-wide strategic plan. Those resources include: – Customized quantitative research reports from NAE on the demographic and economic contributions immigrants their communities; – on-the-ground technical assistance from NAE and Welcoming America to help communities draft, execute, and communicate a multi-sector immigrant integration strategy; – planning grants from NAE that local partners have committed to match.

NAE and Welcoming America also maintain an interactive map outlining initiatives across the United States that support immigrant and U.S.-born entrepreneurs promote citizenship and financial empowerment, improve public safety and access to services, and advance education and workforce goals to help regions compete in the global economy. The map provides detailed information about and examples from the communities that have embraced this work, as well as guidance for those seeking to replicate successful programs and policies.<sup>25</sup>

The reasons behind this approach and positive action vis-à-vis the arrival of refugees (the case of immigrants has to do with other reasons) are different in nature. The particular geographical, social

and economic characteristics that Boise and Idaho show have enabled a highly noteworthy model:

Jan Reeves, 71, the longtime director of the state's refugee office, leans back from piles of printouts in the Jannus building behind a North End strip mall. "We have a receptive community", says Reeves in response to the question as to why refugees come to Boise. "We have resources. There are opportunities here. There are many community partners that are engaged in the resettlement process. Refugees have an opportunity here to start their lives on a solid footing with a positive future ahead of them. And that's what we want."<sup>26</sup>

### **Transcending to the political sphere**

To try and explain this phenomenon according to the logic of political party lines is a waste of time. Undoubtedly, the two dominant ideological currents in Boise or Idaho generally mark out the two main approaches to the subject. In between, however, there are many nuances to take into account that escape this rigid political framework.

Donostia City Council is made up of 27 councilors belonging to political parties, and all of them work full-time. Boise is headed by a Democrat mayor in a Republican area, as we mentioned earlier. He is assisted by a team of five councilors, none of whom work full-time for the city council. Four of them can be considered close to the Democratic Party, while the fifth, Scot Ludwig, is close to the Republican Party and recently presented a

resolution to condemn the acts of violence in Charlottesville.<sup>27</sup>

“Racism is an affront to the ideals of our nation and the conscience of our residents,” the resolution reads.

“The Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups do not represent the opinions and values of the people of Boise.” Ludwig, the rare Republican at City Hall, said he wanted to bring the resolution forward earlier, but planned to wait until after Mayor Dave Bieter’s State of the City address, which was scheduled for late August.

Then Bieter’s address was delayed until November because of the death of former Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus. The resolution echoes a proclamation the City Council unanimously approved in January declaring that Boise welcomes refugees and other immigrants. Councilwoman Lauren McLean was that proclamation’s primary author.

The City Council unanimously approved Ludwig’s resolution Tuesday night.

Indeed, in January 2017, the proclamation of Boise as a city that welcomes refugees and immigrants was unanimously approved.

On Tuesday, though, Mayor David Bieter allowed a crowd of a few dozen to rise to their feet and clap after the council unanimously passed a resolution proclaiming that Boise is “committed to being a Welcoming City and creating a community where all of our residents feel welcomed, safe, and able to fully participate in, and contribute to, our city’s economic

and social life.”

“We urge all residents of Boise to do their part in reaching out and welcoming all those who live in and visit our great City,” states the resolution.<sup>28</sup>

There is, therefore, a clear will to point out a route map unequivocally supporting the arrival of immigrants and refugees, particularly to Boise. Boise is an island inside a deeply Republican state, but a city where the Mayor received the support of Pat Cenarrusa, the former Secretary of State and a Republican.<sup>29</sup> Pat Cenarrusa enthusiastically supported Obama. These are signs of a political pluralism that many Basques find difficult to understand, for example, the fact that most of the Basque community in Idaho are Republican sympathizers. It is a state where Democrat-oriented Sun Valley coexists alongside a North that has changed from being a traditional Democrat area to a mainly conservative one with the arrival of many Californians (many of them from the Orange County Police Department). Then there is the strongly Republican Twin Falls, but where clear initiatives emerge in favor of tolerance and diversity from religious organizations such as the First Presbyterian Church.<sup>30</sup> It is worthwhile, therefore, getting out of one’s comfort zone and trying to find references that help to complete any analysis. The role played by civil society in general is also a key factor here:

Boiseans extend hands and open their hearts through soccer leagues, churches, and charitable foundations. A clearinghouse called united links 16 government offices and 30

nonprofits. The Agency for New Americans provides case workers fluent in 12 languages. The International Rescue Committee has worked tirelessly to help refugees become self-sustaining. The Boise School District coordinates translation services in 84 languages. Global Talent, a Jannus affiliate, smooths the path to employment for skilled professionals. Global Gardens help Somali Bantu farmers' plant community roots.<sup>31</sup>

There is no doubt that a range of stakeholders and institutions of different color guarantees the solidity and across-the-board nature that makes Boise a model very distant from the usual stereotypes:

*Welcome the Stranger*

Boise's embrace is proof that right and left, secular and religious, can share common goals for different political reasons. Secular pluralism can fuse with the evangelist sense of service when people of every stripe yearn to connect with the world.

Cole, a humanitarian pioneer, rises above denomination with a family mentoring service. Mentors meet families once a week to teach the Boise basics: how to list in Muslim shops, pay bills, barbecue, and bike to the zoo. Annually the church sponsors hold an ecumenical "peace feast". Half the guests are Muslims. Lamb killed by hand is blessed and prepared according to Islamic halal practices.<sup>32</sup>

The diversity of voices does not prevent unusual joint action in other places and areas of societies, where extreme polari-

zation is imposing itself more and more:

Marla Olsen of Boise credits this church at Maple Grove and Ustick as the model for programs she coordinates for eight congregations of Latter-Day-Saints. "When it comes to service," says Olsen, "we are not Mormon or Catholic or Jewish. We are all just trying in the gaps".

Recently she encountered a Rabbi while tutoring a refugee in a classroom provided by Boise's Temple Beth Israel. "Here," said the rabbi, smiling, "we have a Mormon in a Jewish synagogue teaching English to a Muslim."

The teaching goes two ways, says Donald Batubenga, the Congolese pastor of New Christian Church.

"They (the refugees) have shifted the social life of this community".

Batubenga alternates sermons in English and Swahili, his parishioners are Zambian, Sudanese, Ethiopian, Nigerian, Rwandan, Caribbean and Idahoan. Church music plays in Lingala, Bemba, Zulu, Creole, English and French...

"Red or blue, victory or not, we need each other," says Rev. Sara LaWall, a Boise Unitarian. Her voice was strong in December 2015 at a rain-soaked vigil on the stairs of the Idaho Statehouse. Singing "This Land is your land" and waving bike lights and glow sticks, there was no mistaking the political message. "Faith calls us to value love over fear," said LaWall.

"All of our faith teachings have a strong presence of refugees."<sup>33</sup>

Exclusivity in the characterization of a

strongly interiorized policy in Boise is certainly not its main feature. In each analysis we find data, that express desire that is taken on by different leaders in different fields. Patrick Hunter, PR & Strategic Engagement Manager in Hewlett-Packard, says:

Our commitment to diversity through hiring is seen through key partnerships with the Society of Women Engineers (SWE), National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), and Universities around the country. These partnerships provide opportunities to attract top talent from around the world representing diversity of geography, gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity to Boise. Combined with employee resource groups such as our vibrant Young Employee Network, we are able to retain the talent that we attract.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion: Boise is not paradise**

In a turbulent world that lacks references, there are no paradises. Boise does not aim to be one, but a magnificent experience is emerging that offers highly useful teachings. From the Basque perspective, Boise is one of the great references in the universe of Diasporas. It occupies a unique position there. Work well done has meant that it has become a benchmark for many Basques, a kind of Mecca, the place that all Basques would like to visit once in their lives. However, we should not forget about our other diasporas, all of them are worthy of our respect.

However, I feel that the interest in Boise

goes beyond its status as the center of one of the great Basque communities abroad. And there is no doubt that, in the story of Boise as a welcoming city, the Basque community has also played a key role. The things that Boise continually teaches us need to be taken very much into account. I live in a region and a city with one of the lowest birthrates in Europe. Europe, and western societies in general, are facing one of the greatest challenges to their survival. Russia and Italy, to mention two examples that the media have highlighted, are facing up to historic challenges in this respect, and Euskadi is not unaffected by this very worrying scenario. From this perspective, it would even be good if Euskadi could elaborate some kind of strategy. Beyond the restrictive quotas imposed by Europe, Euskadi is at a historic crossroads. Our survival as a people is on the line. Either we improve the birthrate or we start to welcome new energy from outside. Some people in our country see risks to our identity in the arrival of other identities, cultures and languages. New sensibilities, new perspectives, new energies. Boise shows us that these fears are unfounded. Boise is showing us that a commitment to welcome this great diversity is the best option that any city can make nowadays. Beyond the statistics and responding to structural deficits, Boise has gone for creating a happier, more attractive and more diverse society. That is the great attraction of cities like Boise or Toronto.

In Donostia, the city I live in, apart from this serious demographic problem that we need to face up to, we may even be facing a bigger one. Living in a city that is close to perfection, with an almost unbeatable quality of life, with top-level cultural, sports, health and educational

facilities, with people who believe they live in the best city in the world; this can be a serious obstacle. The lack of incentives to get out of one's comfort zone could be the beginning of the end. Boise, with everything still to be done and isolated from the world, understood the need to call on many people who wanted to start out on a new life; preferably people who were a depository of cultures, languages, religions and different races. That is the grandeur of Boise, and its great attractiveness.

In my city there are sectors of the population that feel fear of the arrival of new energies, whether they would be tourists or visitors. The anti-tourist campaign we have seen this summer is the best example of that sector of the population that defends closing borders. Some communiqués, or opinions expressed by 'spokespersons' of some of the city's neighborhoods are poles apart from the Boise model. What is so contradictory is that people belonging to those who consider Boise as the great hope of the Basque people are acting precisely oppositely to the criteria that have taken Boise to the levels of excellent it has reached. The admiration Boise arouses among us is a complete package, you cannot just cherry pick. That is cheating.

Fortunately, there are many among us who welcome the arrival of different people and cultures. When we visit the Historic Quarter of Donostia and hear different languages and people that give us hope for the future. Euskadi will have a future if it follows the path taken by Boise. Boise is not only one of our references in the Basque diaspora. Two years ago, I gave a talk in a congress in Boise titled "Boise: the future of the Euskadi of the 21<sup>st</sup> century", in which I tried to

explain the great teachings that Boise offers us as a model for society. Like all societies, Boise is faced with the same problems and similar challenges in the context of uncertainty that affects us all. It is, however, marking out an interesting way forward for other societies. That said, it has been able to – and still does – turn difficulties into opportunities. Boise has made a strong commitment, fearlessly and without complexes. It can still improve enormously and continues to do so.

I come from a city that borders on perfection, one in which many of its inhabitants are terrified by any change. The risk this mentality holds is very great, and above all it jeopardizes the future of our children. The egoism of a generation could ruin our children's future. Boise gives us a fine lesson in solidarity, generosity and broad vision. On a daily basis, Boise offers us a great lesson in hope and enthusiasm. Above all, it is a breath of fresh air. Open societies survive and prosper. Boise has assured its future. We have a mirror to look at ourselves in.

### Notes

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