

BROOKLYN DAILY

August 1, 2018

Facts of 'Life': Ridge artist's take on classic board game spotlights immigrants' experiences

By JULIANNE McSHANE



BROOKLYN DAILY/TREY PENTECOST

Game of "Life": Ridge resident Isabelle Garbani, right, created an immigration-themed version of the "Life" board game, which will be on display and available for locals to play at Caffe Cafe on Third Avenue at 84th Street — co-owned by Kelley Lynch, left — through the winter.

She has skin in this game.

A Bay Ridge artist created a new version of a classic board game, focusing on immigrants' experiences as they resettle in the United States, inspired by her own move from France as a teenager. Isabelle Garbani said she hopes "Life: Immigration Game" — which is available for locals to play for free at Caffe Café on Third Avenue at 84th Street through the end of the year — will help raise awareness of the challenges that immigrants must face and overcome.

"I want people to go through some of the experiences that immigrants go through, and develop a little bit more empathy for the immigration experience," said Garbani, who has lived in Bay Ridge since 2005 and teaches sculpture and public art at Wagner College on bucolic Staten Island.

“Life: Immigration Game” uses the same general concept as the classic Milton Bradley game, which brings players through life’s highs and lows, including college, working, getting married, having children, and owning a home, while they earn and lose money along the way. But Garbani customized her game by overlaying the board’s surface with her old family photos and rewriting all the tiles along the path to reflect the real-life — and sometimes unexpected — triumphs and tribulations that she culled from interviews with about 20 local immigrants.

“Everything in the game is something that’s actually happened to someone,” she said.

Garbani and her family members — whom she also interviewed for the game — experienced some of the challenges in the game themselves when they emigrated from their native France to Massachusetts in 1984, when Garbani was 17-years-old. She quickly encountered strong prejudices against both her French culture and her status as an immigrant, she said, and those memories helped inform her decision to create the game.

“People would make jokes about the French all the time, thinking it was really funny, saying things like, ‘thank god we saved you in World War II — if it weren’t for us, you’d be speaking German,’ or, ‘of course you like cheese, you’re French — that’s probably why you’re stinky, too,’” she recalled. “I wanted to do a project on immigration for a long time because of those micro-aggressions and the good and bad of moving here.”

Players start by drawing an “identifica-tion card,” which lists their profession and salary in their country of origin and their new circumstances upon arrival in the U.S. Garbani pulled certain details — including substantial pay cuts and professional changes forced by lack of U.S.-specific qualifications — from the interviews she conducted, she said. In one instance, a Pakistani surgeon goes from making \$22,000 a year to making \$11,000 working as a health aide in Texas. In another, a Yemeni math teacher earning \$16,000 annually back home loses half of their salary when they become a school janitor in Minnesota.

Then players progress through “life,” earning and losing thousands along the way as they encounter both quotidian and life-altering challenges. “Co-workers mock your culture every day. Pay \$5,000 for therapy,” reads one tile, which Garbani said was inspired by her experience working in the corporate video game industry. Others detail pricier difficulties: “Scammed by immigration lawyer! Pay \$25,000,” reads one. “Need to identify body of relatives dead in Arizona desert border crossing. Pay \$10,000 for DNA test,” reads another, inspired by a true story detailed in “The Death of Josseline,” one of the non-fiction books Garbani consulted in her research.

But Garbani said that even though President Trump’s policies limiting immigration and separating children from their families have thrust immigrants’ stories into the news recently, she created the game to focus on the age-old commonalities of the immigrant experience, adding that she expects the game will make players feel differently than they do when playing a normal board game.

“It’s not about changes in immigration laws that have happened recently, but instead it’s about what it’s like to be in a foreign land, and not know the language, and not know the cultural references, having your entire family away from you, not having a safe community for you to be in,” she said.

“I want people to understand what that’s like, so I do want them to feel a little bit unsettled.”

Garbani is currently working on creating a smaller version of the game to sell online, and aims to spread the full-size version of the game to other game cafes on the distant isle of Manhattan and eventually in cities across the country, she said. But for now, she hopes the game helps Ridgites remember the important role that immigrants play in the country they all call home.

“America is really a country of immigrants, and I’d like people to remember that,” she said.

“Life: Immigration Game” at Caffè Café (8401 Third Ave. at 84th Street in Bay Ridge, www.lifeimmigrationgame.com). Through Dec. Free.

Reach reporter Julianne McShane at (718) 260-2523 or by e-mail at jmcshane@cnglocal.com. Follow her on Twitter @juliannemcshane.