

HOME FRONT

At Whole Foods, a Welcome Sign for Immigrants Seeking Jobs



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

A role-playing session run by Camba, a social services group, and Whole Foods. From right, Wangla Lama plays a store clerk, and Naissatou Doumbia, Sonam Tsering and C. Rodney Pierre portray customers.

By JOSEPH P. FRIED
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WANGLA LAMA, 37, of Queens, has long supported himself by working in restaurant kitchens. In his native Nepal, when he was not employed as a mountain guide, he made his living as a cook. For most of his nine years in the United States, he worked in a Japanese restaurant in Manhattan, he said, rising from busboy to cook, until it closed in February.

Naissatou Doumbia, 20, of the Bronx, a college student in Ivory Coast before she left for the United States five months ago, has never had a job selling food. She is looking for one so she can pay for college in this country.

Mr. Lama and Ms. Doumbia were among 11 immigrants and asylum-seeking refugees in a classroom at a social services organization in Brooklyn last month. They were participating in an eight-day course to prepare them to seek jobs at Whole Foods supermarkets in New York City.

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Representatives of Whole Foods Market, the chain that specializes in natural and organic foods, and the social services group Camba designed the course jointly after Camba proposed it in 2004.

At the time, Whole Foods had two stores in the city with plans for several more. It now

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has four, all in Manhattan, with a total of 1,900 employees.

“Whole Foods is not committed to hiring everyone who completes the course, but has committed to interviewing everyone who completes it,” said Roz Calvert, Camba’s corporate partnership developer and manager of instructional services.

Camba describes the Whole Foods course as a “customized pre-interview training program.” It has the potential to give job seekers a leg up over those who apply to Whole Foods through help-wanted ads or job fairs.

The instruction covers topics like organic foods and customer service and includes a tour of a Whole Foods store. Those who have gone through the training are generally “better prepared, aware of the culture of Whole Foods, have better skills and know what the jobs will require,” said John Dauenhauer, senior coordinator for team member services in the company’s Northeast region.

Camba, a nonprofit organization, was formed in 1977 as a neighborhood business group, the Church Avenue Merchants’ Block Association, in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. It has since expanded into a social services organization with an annual budget of more than \$50 million and 800 employees. Its programs provide education, housing, [immigration](#), business development, employment and other services to low-income people throughout Brooklyn, and in some cases to residents of other boroughs, said Eileen F. Reilly, its director of work-force development and refugee services.

All the trainees in the Whole Foods class were immigrants and refugees, from Latin American and Caribbean countries as well as from Asia and Africa. Ms. Reilly said financing for the program, now at \$75,000 a year, comes from city and state grants earmarked for efforts that aid these groups.

Since January 2005, Camba has offered the Whole Foods course 18 times. A total of 202 people have completed it, and 123, or 61 percent, have been hired by the company, Ms. Calvert said last week. Fourteen are awaiting interviews or suitable job openings and 65 have been rejected or decided to seek work elsewhere, she said. (Mr. Dauenhauer said he did not know the hiring rate among applicants for Whole Foods jobs generally in the city.)

Starting wages, Mr. Dauenhauer said, would be \$10 an hour for a checkout-counter bagger with no experience and \$13 to \$16 for someone with cooking experience hired to help put together the prepared foods. He said that about 80 percent of employees work a 40-hour week, with the rest working part time.

At the Camba class last month, Mr. Lama, citing his experience at the Japanese restaurant, said of Whole Foods, “I’d like to get into the sushi section.” Even more, he said, he wanted a job that provided health insurance, which Whole Foods offers — an improvement over the restaurant job, which did not provide such insurance for him and his wife and two children.

As it turns out, Mr. Lama found a job in a hotel kitchen that not only provides insurance but pays a higher wage than Whole Foods, Ms. Calvert said last week.

Ms. Doumbia, despite her lack of experience working in a food store, said she had something to offer Whole Foods. “I’d like to be a cashier,” she said, “and I work very fast.”

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