

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## GREATER NEW YORK

URBAN GARDNER June 26, 2012

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



## The City's African Heart

Vodka pairs nicely with lots of different things. There's the classic vodka with fresh caviar combo. Even better is vodka with caviar and crème fraîche. And best of all is vodka with a dollop of both on blini.



Ralph Gardner/The Wall Street Journal

Rouguiatou Tounkara with her 3-month-old son, Sidiy Mohammad.

housing, English classes and a food pantry—was such that it restored your faith in humanity and made you feel guilty you weren't doing more for your fellow man.

The vodka pairing I'm talking about is between African Services and Lucky Dog Vodka, a new entry in the increasingly cluttered "handcrafted" vodka marketplace. The connection between the two is a family one. Kim Nichols, African Services' co-executive director, is the older sister of Greg Nichols, who started Lucky Dog a mere two months ago. The African Services Committee was founded more than a quarter-century ago by Ms. Nichols's husband, Asfaha Hadera, an Ethiopian immigrant. Mr. Nichols has committed 2% of his proceeds to African Services.

"He's my baby brother," Ms. Nichols stated proudly as we sat in the organization's airy conference room.

"Your little, middle-aged baby brother," noted Mr. Nichols, who is 53 years old, and not just a vodka maker but also a Nantucket homebuilder and a former member of the U.S. National Freestyle Ski Team.

His 57-year-old sister is hardly more conventional. After graduating M.I.T. with a degree in biochemistry, she became an acupuncturist. "That is a little ironic," she admitted, as if considering her quirky career path for the first

Vodka also goes great with smoked fish, potato pancakes, pirogues, crab cakes, cheeses, pickles and eggs. But it wasn't until last week that I discovered one of the oddest, least intuitive pairings: vodka and a Harlem nonprofit that provides assistance to New York's African immigrant community.

I know what you're thinking: This disgrace must be ended immediately. We're not going to allow our tax dollars, which help support the organization, the African Services Committee, to be used to help people get drunk in the morning. But it's not like that at all. In fact, when I visited the group last week, everybody involved seemed eminently sober, talented and bright-eyed. The services they were providing a steady stream of visitors—which include medical testing, immigration assistance, political asylum advocacy, help in finding your faith in humanity and made you feel

time. She met her husband—who, on the day of my visit, was in Ethiopia traveling among the four medical clinics the organization runs there—after he came to the U.S. as a political refugee in 1979.

"He started in a basement apartment in the Bronx," Ms. Nichols remembered. "When I joined him in '84 he had no funding, no staff. I started grant writing for him."

Ms. Nichols, who came to New York from Boston planning to practice acupuncture and has lived in Harlem for 30 years, these days applies her alternative-medicine techniques only to herself. "I have walked into her office on multiple occasions and she has multiple needles sticking out of her face," attested Stephanie Kaplan, African Services's communications director and a former Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso.



another Jason Andrew for The Wall Street Journal  
Kim Nichols of the African Services Committee

services," Ms. Nichols explained—among them testing for HIV/AIDS and education on prevention, and also testing and counseling for tuberculosis, hepatitis and pregnancy. Indeed, some of the organization's funding comes via grants from the CDC and the New York City Department of Health. They even have a grant from the Navy for malaria research.

"We have people that might be easier for them to study than going to the African continent," Ms. Nichols said, referring to the organization's clients. I was introduced to two of them—Rouguiatou Tounkara and her chubby, 3-month-old son Sidiy Mohammad. "Rougi," as she's affectionately known, came to the U.S. in 2009 to care for an elderly gentleman. When she fell ill three months later, she discovered she was HIV positive.

A nurse at the hospital suggested she contact the African Services Committee. They not only helped her with housing and medical assistance, but also in getting her green card and, most recently, arranging for her husband and an older son, who she left behind in Guinea, to join her shortly in the U.S.

Perhaps most importantly, African Services provides her a community center that is a refuge from the sometimes-hardscrabble immigrant life. "I come sometimes when I want to be happy," said Ms. Tounkara, who was in the food pantry cooking mafe, a traditional dish of stewed meat, peanut sauce and rice. She lives 45 minutes away in the Bronx and visits twice a week to take English classes.

"I like to come and meet my sisters; we come from different countries," she said. "When we come here we can speak and have fun."

Indeed, Ms. Kaplan, the communications director, reported that African Services was recently contacted by a cable TV cooking show that wanted to do an African cooking segment.

That's not unusual, she said—the media often uses the organization as a resource for all things African. For example, when MTV needed an African teenager to appear on one of its programs it turned to ASC.

"They're anti-aging against crows feet," Ms. Nichols explained. "It would be much worse if I didn't use needles."

So how do the brother and sister explain their idiosyncratic career trajectories? "We have kind of a freewheeling, globe-trotting mother who encouraged us to do whatever we could," Mr. Nichols said.

"To build structures and institutions," Ms. Nichols added.

The African Services Committee, which assists more than 12,000 people a year in the U.S. and 40,000 in Ethiopia, started as a refugee-resettlement organization for people throughout Africa. "We've evolved to provide health

The organization was also contacted regarding a comment for a story surrounding Madonna's controversial adoption of two children from Malawi. And when the Dominique Strauss-Kahn scandal involving an African hotel housekeeper broke, ASC was once again asked to find someone to weigh in.

According to Ms. Kaplan, the producers of "Little Miss Sunshine" also contacted the group when they were casting a movie. The nonprofit found them an 8-year-old boy who was successfully cast in the role.

"He got the part in this huge film," she remembered. Unfortunately, "he didn't have his papers yet. He missed out on it. It just killed me."

With the African Services Committee's help the papers came through—a month and a half later.

We adjourned to the food pantry for some of Rougi's tasty mafe. There was also an adjoining pot filled with peppers.

Kim Nichols strongly counseled against trying them. "Somebody went to the hospital after eating one," she recalled. "And he was African."

— [ralph.gardner@wsj.com](mailto:ralph.gardner@wsj.com)