

Getting a Handle on Immigration Issues

By Bonnie Hobbs

Sunday, November 18, 2007



[Email this Article](#)
[Print this Article](#)

In light of the area's increasing diversity, some three dozen local residents gathered last week at the Centreville Regional Library to discuss immigration issues.

BUT INSTEAD of having the hunt-'em-down-and-deport-'em mentality of some other counties, people at this meeting focused instead on cooperation and integration.

"We are especially interested in finding alternatives to the prejudice and misunderstanding that surround the immigration issue today," said Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ, which sponsored the meeting.

"This has been seen in neighboring towns and counties, but we believe that Centreville can do better," she said. "We want to work together as a community to solve the problems we all face."

Moderating the meeting, last Thursday, Nov. 1, was Al Fuentes, a GMU professor of mediation and conflict resolution. And at the outset, he had the attendees identify themselves and tell their concerns.

They included people such as Demis and Jose Flores, originally from El Salvador. They've lived in Chantilly for 22 years and formerly owned Los Amigos Market Store in Centreville Square.

Tanya Mateo, from Venezuela, has lived here 10 years, and her husband Nelson, who came from Puerto Rico, is a retired, Virginia State Police officer.

The Rev. Diana Gomez de Molina Collins, a chaplain with the United Church of Christ (UCC), described herself as a bridge builder. "My father is Cuban and my mother is American," she said. "I'm a Hoosier, but I was made in Mexico from imported products."

Virginia Run's Marge Lewis said she likes coming to the Centreville library, but is "uneasy about the day laborers outside. Immigrants are great; they shouldn't be illegal." And Stephen Vandivere of Cabell's

Mill said he fears overreaction to illegal immigrants spilling over to legal immigrants.

A Centre Ridge woman, worried that immigrant groups might be harassed, said, "We don't know how to talk to each other and integrate them into our community."

WELLSPRING member Jerry Valerio, a first-generation Filipino American, said it's important for people to create a common heritage. "One of the things I love about the U.S. is the diversity and how, over time, we've integrated people."

Laurel Patton, also of Wellspring, said, "We're all just human beings; we all live in this world and should work together, rather than point the finger of blame at each other. We need better communication and understanding of each other as people."

Fuertes said he brings in "the healing component" in peace building. "We don't have to have the same views as everyone else," he said. "That's the essence of community."

Moving on to more specific worries, local resident Mike Murphy said, "My biggest, overarching fear is that, we have so many illegal immigrants coming into our country — can we absorb them into our culture, or will we be absorbed into theirs?"

"I'm concerned that the children of illegal immigrants are also considered illegal — even though they had no choice in the matter [of being here]," said Vandivere. "It's like saying, 'Your father's a felon; you must be one, too.'"

Wellspring's Mark Williams said Centreville's grown so fast, over the past few years, "it's lost that small-town feeling. [Regarding immigrants], I'm concerned about overcrowded housing, strains on resources and safety issues."

Jerry Foltz, a UCC regional minister, noted a fear that immigrants have — namely, "If they're taken advantage of or exploited, they're afraid to report it." Added Vandivere: "We need a way to get immigrants in legally, so they don't have to be illegal."

However, replied Murphy, "We're a society governed by laws. But when you have the day laborers springing up, it puts people in sort of a war mentality — 'us against them.' And if they get a pass on the laws, that's what grates on people who have abided by the rules."

Valerio said people often come to the U.S. on work visas, for the education, but don't feel welcome here. So, he said, "They take the education they got here — plus bad feelings about this country — back to their own countries."

THE REV. COLLINS said unacceptable behavior needs to be defined. "We have certain things [that are illegal here], but not in other countries," she explained. "Acculturation easily takes three generations. Language is a problem, and it's extremely difficult to go through the immigration process."

Besides that, she said, "People are traumatized leaving their own countries, families and support systems. No one wants to leave their mother land; but the minute you create a safe community, many of those things fall into place." But, warned Murphy, "If they don't buy into the American ethic, there'll be a clash of cultures."

Nelson Mateo said people should ask themselves why so many legal immigrants are now being victimized. And during traffic stops in some places, he said, "Police can ask people for their visas. Where do we draw the line?"

He also noted that a person can get a fake, Social Security card in Washington, D.C., give it to his employer and work for him. "Then he'll send his taxes to the IRS," said Mateo. "But the IRS doesn't send the money back, saying, 'Hey, this is a fake number.' And if we are getting rid of people who are doing the hard labor — landscaping, painting houses, etc. — who's going to do it? It'll eventually affect the economy."

Mario Zilleruelo of The Meadows said, "If people are afraid to approach people who look different, how can we integrate? Education and compassion are key."

"One of the values we're taught in America is to have respect for everybody," said Dr. Fran Durocher, a retired physician. "To deny health care to people, just because they're illegal, is horrible. And if you're in a country that asks if you're illegal, you're not going to seek health care."

"I am an immigrant, and I know many of them don't use the health services," added Zilleruelo. "They're afraid." But, said Murphy, "They come here for those benefits. It's a conundrum."

Jose Flores noted that, because of the crackdown on illegal immigrants in Prince William County, the illegals are leaving that county,

businesses there are suffering and home values are plummeting. "If that happens here, we're in trouble," he said.

Acknowledging the large influx of Koreans into Centreville, as well, some people said the Koreans don't seem to care whether any nonKorean customers patronize their businesses. Added Little Rocky Run's Jan Welch: "When the signs are in Korean, people who can't read them can't do business there."

IN GENERAL, said Alice Foltz, things can be done to create "a better, stronger community here. [We need to determine] what can we do to create a place that is safe and welcoming for the people who work here."

Murphy said doing so would encourage more illegals to come, but Foltz said they shouldn't be separated "when providing emergency care and education." Asked Furtres: "If someone's car breaks down, would you help, or would you first ask, 'Are you illegal?'" Most people said they'd help.

"We need to create venues where people can meet, learn about each other's cultures and learn what it means to be an American citizen," said Collins. And Patton said she appreciated people's "honesty and courage" in expressing themselves during the meeting.

Centre Ridge's Nina Seebeck thanked Furtres for "creating an environment where people could speak about [immigration]." And Furtres set the next meeting for Thursday, Nov. 29, 7-9 p.m., in the Sully District Governmental Center, 4900 Stonecroft Blvd. in Chantilly.



©2011 [Connection Newspapers](#). All Rights Reserved. [Privacy Policy](#)

1606 King Street ♦ Alexandria, VA 22314 ♦ 703-821-5050

Site Design, Development and Hosting by [Timberlake Publishing](#)

[Subscribe to our email editions here.](#)