

2nd Talk on Immigration

By Bonnie Hobbs, Centre View
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Although 'immigration' seems to be a dirty word to many people nowadays, some local residents hope to change that.

About 30 of them gathered recently to discuss it at the second in a series of meetings on the topic.

AND ALTHOUGH those attending raised more questions than they answered, they at least made an attempt to get a handle on the issues involved. They also got an earful from many of their neighbors.

"We can't solve the problem of immigration," said the moderator, Al Fuertes, a GMU professor with a doctorate in conflict resolution. "This is simply a venue where the public could come together. It's important to know our perspectives — where everyone is coming from — so we know why we have certain views on this issue."

Wellspring United Church of Christ sponsored the meeting, Nov. 29, at the Sully District Governmental Center, and member Alice Foltz spoke first.

"After the tragic incident at Virginia Tech, we realized we did not have a way to share our feelings with the Korean community and learn their feelings, as well," she explained. "It made us think about this issue of diversity, and we realized we're parallel communities who don't know each other very well."

FOLTZ SAID people here have children in school together, and businesses are led by entrepreneurs with different backgrounds. So, she said, "We should be able to build bridges across our community. And Biblically, and in all religious traditions, there are values of caring for and loving our neighbors."

Fuertes — who also does trauma healing internationally after crises, wars and natural disasters — said healing is "a way of addressing the problem. Conflict tears things apart and affects the collective and

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individual wellbeing."

However, many people drew the line at illegal immigration. Stephen Vandivere of Cabell's Mill is a member of the ACLU and learned from that organization that illegal immigration is a civil offense, not a criminal one. So Fuertes asked the attendees to consider whether illegal-immigrant parents of children born in the U.S. should be deported. "And how should these children be treated?" he asked.

Resident Dave James replied, "We are a country of laws; they're either here legally or not. If they come here, they have to meet the laws. Are the immigration laws being enforced?"

However, Sharon Lloyd, an ESL teacher at Centreville Presbyterian Church, wondered, "Why is it more wrong for people to come here to better feed their families than it is for businesses to pay them slave wages?"

"They should apply for work permits," said Little Rocky Run resident Gerald Horna. "I don't know what their goals and aspirations are." Then, generalizing, he added, "They seem to have no interest in learning English and they live in group homes."

JENET AHN, who formerly owned a dry-cleaning business, said many of her employees had fake, Social Security cards, but she didn't hire illegal immigrants. "It's not so simple to get a work permit," she said. "For these employees, the paperwork went on and on, plus they had to pay legal fees.

"They didn't want to continue with it because it was so complicated, and transportation was also a problem for them. So it breaks my heart — they worked their buns off, but I know they're never going to become legal."

Fuertes said it's critical to acknowledge cultural diversity: "It's an asset to the community. What's important is how we address our differences. The whole, immigration issue is multi-layered, so we can't use just a black-and-white lens. There are so many gray areas to take into account."

He then said he was certain that the group could come up with some "collective undertaking that's well-informed and reflective of the voices of those who took part in this discussion." Next, Supervisor Michael R. Frey (R-Sully) addressed the audience.

He came to listen and was pleased to see so many people representing

various elements of the community "talking and beginning to understand. It's a complex issue; Centreville is changing, and it's always hard to accept change easily."

However, Frey's proud of the area's diversity and noted that Greenbriar West Elementary has 85 flags in its cafeteria, representing the countries of origin of its students. He also said the construction boom here brought a rash of immigrants.

"The common perception is that most are illegal and should go back and come in legally," said Frey. "But there's an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., and there's no way you're going to send them all back. It's racial profiling, it would cost billions in lawsuits and you couldn't afford the police to do it."

"Having brown skin and not speaking English is not a valid reason [to check someone's immigration status]," he continued. "And it will tear the community apart further." And nationally, not all immigrants have assimilated and learned English immediately.

"We have Little Italys in every, major city in the U.S.," said Frey. "It typically takes three generations for people to assimilate. The great melting pot is the school system. And at the local level, we have to educate all the children in the system and are prohibited from asking the immigration status of their parents."

WELLSPRING'S Laurel Patton spoke of the benefits and enrichment that immigrants bring to the community. Agreeing, Frey said that, at school International Nights, "students will be in native costumes and do dances [from their cultures]. Then they'll go back and sit with their friends — and they'll all have the same sneakers and be speaking English."

He said Fairfax County has a strike team to check out reports of crowded housing and too many cars. And he said both conditions are unsafe and promote the deterioration of neighborhoods.

"People who come [to the U.S.] don't always know what's acceptable behavior and it's up to us to let them know," said Frey. "We need federal legislation — clear guidance on who can come and who can't. And we need to begin working together because we have a huge number of immigrants in Centreville."

He said he's worked with elders in Korean churches who've lived here 30 years and still don't speak English — but their children do. "And they need to get involved in the community," said Frey. "So dialogues

like this are a critical part of assimilation and acculturation and the coming together of the community. Americans have done it before and will do it again."

Still, Fair Oaks resident Jose Rivera, originally from El Salvador, said, "I think the government has failed, lately. If you look at me, you think I might be an illegal immigrant. But I've been here 27 years and have been a U.S. citizen for 21 years. So we have to stop fighting and work together because illegal immigrants are going to be here."

Also at the meeting was Mukit Hossain. Originally from Bangladesh, he's the founder of Project Hope and Harmony which established the day-labor site in Herndon. He noted the importance of immigrants to harvest crops and stressed that immigration "is not a linear problem — it's very complex."

HE SAID America's immigration system should be revamped at the federal level. But, he added, "We're creating a lot of ugly rhetoric and fragmenting the community, which doesn't solve the problem. We need to pressure our legislators at the congressional level."

Dr. Fran Durocher of Little River United Church of Christ said she finds it "appalling that, in this day and age, we are hearing Spanish accents and immediately thinking 'illegal immigrants.' Everybody thinks 100 percent of day laborers are illegal, and that's not true. So this is blanket discrimination on the part of many people who are covering it over with [the word] 'immigration.'"

Little Rocky Run's Dave Welch asked what problems are being created by illegal immigrants. "We have an overabundance of people," he said. "How do we deal with that? What can we address at our level?"

Frey said one problem is that immigrants often enter the country in poor health. "For example, they could bring TB, which could spread to everyone," he said. "So we provide health care for everyone."

Jan Welch, Dave's wife and acting director of Western Fairfax Christian Ministries, asked what could be done to help immigrants understand American culture. "There are thousands in this country who want to speak English, and not enough teachers," she explained. "So we should encourage churches to help make it easier for them to assimilate."

Mike Morris said it's a myth that more harm than good comes to the county from illegal immigrants. "It's an important issue," added Frey. "And I support the efforts of anyone who wants to work together on

this. It's important that the community continue to talk and I continue to listen."

Furthermore, Dan Choi of the Virginia Justice Center told the audience, "If you have this problem, congratulations: Immigrants don't go to countries that are poor, but where the economy's strong and they can find work."

He said they sometimes come because they're facing difficult situations in their own countries. "Often, they risk everything to come here to feed their families," said Choi. "[Otherwise], who wants to go to a foreign country where you don't know the language or the culture?"

Professionally, Choi represents clients who don't get adequately paid for their labor. "And when they're digging a ditch, they don't have time to learn English," he said. "They're not coming here just to take our benefits, but to do the best they can for their families." And in most cases, added Durocher, they're sending money back home to help their relatives.

SO WHEN it comes to illegal immigrants, said Choi, "It's just human compassion to let it go. "Immigrants — legal and illegal — don't get welfare," he said. "The benefits they do get — education, health care, etc. — protect us all. So I ask that we don't look at [this issue] with our emotions, but as, 'What can work?'"

Dave James, however, was unmoved. "They got here, they can figure out how to go home," he said. "But Choi said people need to discuss the matter, instead of blaming the people who are here already."

He noted that approximately 40 percent of illegal immigrants in the U.S. eventually returned to their countries — "until we tightened up the borders. Then it went down to 20 percent."

Moderator Fuertes said the group will meet again Jan. 31 and should discuss "the problems created by immigrants here which local government can solve. We need to come up with a strategic plan."

Centreville's Cheryl Repetti suggested local churches plus civic organizations such as the Centreville Community Foundation (CCF) unite to try to solve problems locally. Nationally, said Stephen Vandivere, "We all ought to ask our federal representatives to clean up and simplify the immigration laws so they're enforceable and don't cost huge sums of money."



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