

Group Plans for Its Future
Immigration Forum reviews accomplishments, goals.

By Bonnie Hobbs
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At the most recent meeting of the Centreville Immigration Forum (CIF), the group reflected on how far it's come since its beginning and discussed what the future may hold for it.



"We've been meeting two-and-a-half years now," said the CIF's leader, Alice Foltz. "We're a group of people concerned about immigration and immigrants and providing services to them, in one way or another."

Al Fuentes makes a point.



Al Fuentes brought some of his GMU students to the meeting as part of their Spirituality and Conflict Resolution course he teaches there. They also worked with the local immigrant community on weekends in the ESL program at Centreville Regional Library.

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After helping the mainly Hispanic immigrants learn English, they listened while the immigrants spoke about themselves and their experiences. "It was really powerful," said Foltz.

"It was very moving," agreed GMU student Blaine Durnall. "It was fascinating to hear these people's stories."

Added Fuentes: "We learned about their resilience and coping skills."

Barb Shaiko, with Centreville United Methodist Church, said CUMC has 100 students in each of its morning and evening ESL classes. Wellspring United Church of Christ offers its ESL classes at the library. Centreville Baptist Church has these classes, too, and Centreville Presbyterian Church — which has 15 people in its ESL class — has openings for more.

Foltz also noted the new, ESL for Employment course now being taught at NOVA. Students must have a green card or documentation of their legal status in the U.S., plus some English skills. "Job counselors help people fill out job applications," said Foltz. "I visited the people there and was very impressed with their enthusiasm about this program."

NEXT, led by Fuentes, the CIF members brainstormed to further define the group's identity and, as a result, create a mission statement. The points developed were:

- * Find ways for the various churches and community organizations to support each other's work in reaching out to the poor — many of whom are low-income immigrants.
- * Strengthen and increase the community's volunteer base. Said Foltz: "This is especially important as the economic crisis deepens and more people are living on the edge of hunger and homelessness."
- * Increase the number of churches and groups involved in the communitywide discussion on immigration.
- * Integrate immigrant groups into the fabric of the community;
- * Learn about immigrants' problems and challenges and improve their situation.
- * Establish relationships with immigrants to build understanding and to educate the community about them.
- * Support immigration reform, learn the legal issues that could aid immigrants and help them learn their rights.
- * Decide if the CIF is serving the poor or all immigrants?
- * Focus on the local level.
- * Should the CIF advocate for immigrants? Provide services?
- * Build a community as various entities come together to help others and focus on a shared task/goal.
- * Do work that others aren't doing.
- * Be a resource center for information that immigrants need.
- * Take stock of the CIF's strengths.

"You're all selfless, giving up your time to do this," said GMU student Vinny Ali. "Alice and [husband] Jerry Foltz are even learning Spanish, so you have a tremendous strength."

Thanking Ali for his comments, Jerry Foltz replied, "We try to fill in gaps — such as finding transportation for people — and make things work better."

Shaiko stressed the importance of "the relationships we've formed with an immigrant population that's not trusting of other people. The day laborers also come to us for resource information, such as where the hypothermia centers are located. So we have a bank of knowledge and have developed their trust."

Alice Foltz noted, as well, the trust the CIF has received from Supervisor Michael R. Frey (R-Sully) and the local police. "That's because you bring a lot of people to the table," said FACETS Executive Director Amanda Andere. "So you need to determine what your role is going to be, as you go forward."



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