

Gilchrist Center Aims to Bring People Together

As Face of County Changes, a Helping Hand is Offered

By Michael Amon
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When Charles Ly immigrated to Maryland from Vietnam almost 25 years ago, all he knew was that he wanted to work hard.

And he did, as a dishwasher and busboy in several restaurants around the Washington region for 10 years. When Ly turned 23, he opened his first restaurant, The Little Panda in Calvert County.

Now, the 38-year-old Ly owns three restaurants in downtown Wheaton, all of the booming.

Ly says he worked hard, but was also lucky. "I didn't have someone to help me out," he said.

Now, immigrants and minorities can get a helping hand from Montgomery County Government.

On Saturday, more than 100 people turned out in downtown Wheaton for the grand opening of the Charles W. Gilchrist Center for Cultural Diversity. Located in the county's most diverse community, the center's mission is to provide information about everything from starting a business to English classes for the immigrants and minorities who have transformed the county's demographics.

Minorities, as a percentage of Montgomery's population, have doubled since 1990, from 19 percent to more than 38 percent, according to the 2000 Census. Recent estimates show that more than one-fifth of the county's 850,000 residents were born in another country.

"We need to make sure we are reaching out to the new members of our community," said County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), who proposed creating the center.

Named for the former county executive who appointed Montgomery's first black and Hispanic advisers and created the county's Minority Business Procurement Program, the center will have four employees and operate with a \$ 313,000 budget. The county also spent \$535,000 to renovate the

nondescript, off-white brick building that houses the center at 11319 Elkin St., Formerly the home of the Phantasmagora record store and nightclub.

One block of Elkin Street was closed for the grand opening, which organizers said was meant to showcase the many cultures that have made Montgomery County home. Teenagers danced to music from Iran, China, Ireland, and Bolivia; Middle Eastern and Central American food was served; and the Fabulous Flying Fingers, a group of elementary school children from Rockville who translate songs into sign language, performed several numbers.

The center opened Tuesday. It will offer classes on entrepreneurship, computer skills and English, refer immigrants and minorities to county services and provide space for cultural activities such as dance, musical and theatrical performances.

Immigrants need information about their community and government, said Luis Barahona, the owner of El Pulgarcito Latino Restaurant next door to the center.

"Sometimes we have a dream, but we don't know what to do to make the dream come true," said Barahona, 52, who immigrated to the Washington area from his home in El Salvador in 1981.

The center will face the same problem as many of the county services it is trying to promote: how to spread word of its existence among newcomers who often don't speak English and often have to worry about basic survival.

"We're going to have to rely on word of mouth," said Alexandra C. Teaff, the center's director. "We've made a connection with official community leaders, the people that other people go to for information."

Ly said people will unite around the center in time.

"It will help the city bring more people together," he said. "This is good."