

Intercultural Understanding and Community Engagement

Central Northeast Neighbors Conference Room

Thursday, November 13, 2008

Introductions

Phan Bui is a Vietnamese refugee; he arrived in the DC area in mid 1970s. **Marco Mejia** has been in Portland 15 years; he is involved with human rights, labor, and immigration. **Lul Abdulle** is a Somali refugee; she first lived in Dallas, Texas and moved to Portland in 2003. **Pavel Yuzko** is from Ukraine; he is a professor and opera singer, and has been in the US since 1990. Pavel worked at IRCO and then Multnomah County and is affiliated with Slavic Coalition of Oregon. **Melissa Waggoner** is of Navajo and German ancestry; she is affiliated with NAYA and skates with the Rose City Rollers.

What do you like most about your neighborhood/community?

Marco Mejia: Diversity, Family Oriented, Hard Working, Always Happy

There is diversity of ethnicity within the Latino community and other differences as well, such as age and religion. There is a sense of community and family orientation that is the opposite of being isolated – for example kids play outdoors. There is a sense of “us” not separating “the me” and “the you.”

Lul Abdulle: Neighborhood Connections, Neighborhood Meetings are Welcoming

Neighborhood Associations and Neighborhood Coalitions have provided an interconnectedness that welcomes the opportunity for different cultures to connect and to learn about one another.

Pavel Yuzco: Working Parents/Families

Pavel lives in Happy Valley and doesn't have the same sense of neighborhood as described above; if results are seen, the community will be more interested in attending meetings. He doesn't see enough “results” – is time spent in neighborhood meetings going to be beneficial? His community is busy; there's a need for child care if they attend. Not all members of the community have email.

Melissa Waggoner: Openness, Supportive Within the Culture/by Neighborhoods

The American Indian population is all over the region, not just in Northeast Portland. Melissa likes the openness and inclusiveness of her community. The urban community differs from the reservation in terms of transportation, schools, etc. The neighborhoods have been supportive. Melissa described the concept of “Four Directions” – strengthening one aspect bolsters other aspects – a good analogy for community building.

Phan Bui: 30,000 Vietnamese in Portland, Sharing Experiences with War

Phan is anti-communist; in defining “who we are” he still sees the division between the “Viet Cong” and the “Vietnamese.” Phan gave a brief history of the Vietnam War and described the various waves of refugee migration that came to the US starting in the mid-1970s. Earlier waves included political refugees while later waves have included sponsored immigrants, and most recently students that he feels “have been influenced by the Viet Cong.

Describe a project or effort you have been involved in that helped others become more aware of your culture and become engaged.

Melissa:

- Madison and Parkrose High Schools/elementary school education
- NAYA Culture Department sharing activities and common interests – students connect through dance; sharing both sacred and fun things
- Tribal cultures are distinct, yet we are all the same people; political boundaries drawn by the government divide us

Pavel:

- 18,000 Slavic people in Portland face barriers similar to other immigrants
- Faith based; churches are a gathering place where Slavic people can be reached
- Education and history very important – work with schools educating teachers and counselors; note there are many different groups that have come from the former Soviet Union – his is not a monolithic culture
- It’s more of a closed culture, tend to keep things internal, but that is starting to change
- There are barriers based on skin color, and a scarcity of funding for the various ethnic groups
- Bi-cultural/bi-lingual is very important
- There is a fear and distrust of government due to the experience of living in a communist society

Lul:

- National Night Out involvement – translated materials were helpful
- Educate service providers – translation is key for outreach, as well as knowing the translator
- Work with Latino community to improve communication and understand each other’s ways

Marco:

- Difficult times contribute to bringing the Latino and Somali communities together
- Freedom Schools (similar to the 1960s civil rights movement)
- Youth Fest – celebration of diversity among youth; fashion shows, expressing new things in the culture
- Faith communities understand immigration, provide support, provide sanctuary, try to keep families from being broken up
- End of year celebration that’s open to other faith communities as well

Phan:

- Two schools – La Vang at NE 54th and Alameda and Van Lang at SE 82nd and Division

What are three keys ways that your community would like to be approached by other community groups?

What are three significant barriers your community has to engaging and connecting with other communities?

Lul:

- Community events are best communicated through the children's schools; send messages through the schools; have parental involvement
- Invite Somali community members to help distribute flyers
- Translation/translator for the parent is important; language is a barrier but kids are learning fast
- To respect the religion, have female translators
- Weekends are best for events because kids are home, factory workers don't work weekends
- Consider transportation – bus travel and transfers with many kids is challenging

Pavel

- When children skip school have a person (rather than a recorded message) call the parents; Educators who speak the parent's language are appreciated
- It would help to have a translator in the schools to call
- Churches are a good way to reach out to the community; pastors are respected
- Working to support family without government help is important, but may be prioritized over learning new language (which is difficult)
- Information about medical care and health insurance is needed

Phan

- Best ways to reach out to the community are through the Van Lang school principal and through the churches
- Respect elders; realize that there are different ways to address men, women and children
- Language and transportation are barriers

Marco:

- The community is very diverse; sometimes Latinos don't understand each other
- Latinos have many origins – including Native American
- Like to be approached, invited because they have a community perspective
- Face similar issues or struggles that bring people together
- Medical access is important
- Sensitivity to terminology related to immigrants such as “aliens, others, them, illegals, etc.”
- Support programs like Day Labor (not just for Latinos)
- Fear and lack of knowledge of “the other” is a barrier
- Community outreach helps prevent isolation
- Look at immigrants as the talented people that they are!

Melissa

- Crucial to build trust by making effort to be involved with community; there's a distrust of government workers, schools, etc due to past experiences
- Hand shaking is different; sometimes other cultures are too direct and overpowering when they speak directly and harshly
- Cultural difference in respecting elders; youth are taught to listen and not look elders in the eye
- Thanksgiving Holiday not celebrated (a different focus on the family time than whites); ironic that people want to know about Native American culture in November but not through rest of the year
- Not everyone looks the same; make the invisible visible; Native Americans are taught that their culture doesn't matter
- Personal invites are best for events
- Future generations are important focus; providing for the seventh generation
- Melissa looks up to strong female leaders

Questions from the audience

“Are you excited about the prospect of an Obama presidency?”

Melissa said: “Yes, it is a generational victory that continues civil rights and other 1960/70s movements.” Community organizing continues to be a key; keep government accountable. Phan is excited but worried about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Marco is excited but has mixed feelings. It's an important historic precedence, and the international community will see the US in a more positive light, as there has been a lack of trust in government. But without our continued participation change is not going to happen. Lul stated that the election shows what we can achieve when living in a safe country

How can we avoid well intentioned mistakes when communicating with other cultures?

Acceptance is important and attempts at understanding are appreciated. Ask first before giving. Lul noted that Somalis don't celebrate Christmas and Halloween but they still like and accept gifts (except spirits and beer). Marco noted that giving can sometimes be another form of separating “us and them.” Teaching how to fish, not just giving the fish is a good approach.

The US is a young country. Our history starts when the Europeans came; it doesn't go back far enough to include the Native Americans who were here first. How can we keep this important dialog going?

Marco noted the United Nations International Day of the Migrant on December 18th as a day to understand and celebrate Latino history and culture. Lul suggested establishing a Migration Day celebration in Portland. Pavel said we need to educate urban kids about where food comes from, and Thanksgiving would be a good time for this. Expanding and building this workshop series into a curriculum is a possibility.

