

Vermont Center for Cultural Diversity (VCCD)

Background

Over the last twenty-five years, Vermont has welcomed and resettled about 8,000 refugees, as well as many other newcomers who have arrived here as immigrants. The overwhelming majority have settled in the greater Burlington and Chittenden County area. These newcomers have arrived from many countries, for different reasons, and represent a great variety of cultures. Some of our schools' report having students—the children of refugees—from over 30 countries. As these children attend school and their parents join the workforce, both the children and their parents adapt to the American way of life and begin the process of assimilation into American culture.

The concept of the Vermont Center for Cultural Diversity came about as an effective way to increase knowledge and awareness among the native-born population about the historical backgrounds and cultures of those who have settled in our midst, especially those individuals and families who have been expelled from their homes by force, and who come from cultures very different from our American culture.

What is proposed here is a permanent facility, located in or near Burlington, the function of which will be to provide an ongoing series of talks, films, plays, storytelling, language lessons, exhibits and other events and programs—all open to the public—that showcases and explains the various cultures represented here in a sympathetic and informative fashion. There is little doubt that an effort of this nature will contribute to an increased understanding between our ethnically and culturally different groups, thus reducing the inherent fear and suspicion—whether deliberate or unintended—that naturally exists between people who have an inadequate understanding of each other. Building relationships based on mutual understanding and respect moves us towards a more harmonious and productive co-existence that we all benefit from.

In working towards the goal of establishing a local center that honors and promotes our region's ethnic diversity, a working committee is being created that will meet regularly to work on a plan that will ultimately culminate in a viable,

self-sustaining center for ethnic and cultural diversity for Chittenden County and Vermont.

The following delves into the functions and activities envisioned for the Center and provides detail on timing and organization as we proceed towards our goal.

Events and activities envisioned for the Center for Cultural Diversity

Exhibits

The Center will be a venue for photography and art exhibits, as well as the display of cultural items from a variety of countries and cultures, for example, traditional clothing, pottery, items from daily life, etc. The thought is to showcase the different cultures and countries represented in Vermont with an on-going series of exhibits. For example, Bhutanese culture and history might be exhibited for a couple of months, followed a similar focus on Bosnia and the Balkans, followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo, and so on.

Lectures

As a way to give the public a better understanding of the world events that are drivers of displacement and immigration, and their follow-on consequences, the Center will feature talks by professionals and experts on the various areas and issues. Similarly, the life stories told by men and women who have been directly affected, who have suffered profound loss and been forced to start their lives over in a completely foreign environment, will be offered from time to time: these personal accounts are very effective in conveying what it means to be a refugee. Thus, by listening to professionals and our resident New Americans—our new neighbors—the Center contributes towards breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding, and enhancing the co-existence between all of us, foreign-born or otherwise.

Language and cultural preservation

Most, if not all, refugee parents expect their children to learn the language they spoke as children, i.e. their mother tongue. This occurs naturally while children are

very young, but once children of foreign-born parents start school, there is a strong impetus to favor English. Without a robust cultural environment, beyond what the family can provide, competency in the parents' language often stagnates or even declines. In some cases, children are reluctant to speak the "old" language, even rejecting it entirely. While this situation is problematic for verbal fluency, it is far worse for competency in reading and writing. It is important to nurture and preserve "inherited" language ability, because it is often an essential tool to fully understanding one's family history and background, not to mention being able to communicate with friends and family members who have little or no English ability. Furthermore, in this country, where "foreign" language competency is very low, mastery of another language can be a crucial asset for careers in business, the military and in education. Thus, the Center can be a valuable resource by providing both avenue and the facilities to support language learning. Furthermore, those without a refugee or immigrant background, but wanting to learn another language (Nepali, Swahili, for example) for travel or academic purposes, could benefit from the course offerings as well.

The recently published book on Vermont's New Americans, *Suddenly You Are Nobody*, which relates the lives of 30 refugees (and several immigrants) from 17 countries, is being used in local high schools and colleges to inform and educate both teachers and students. While books and other initiatives directed to education, are much-needed and effective tools, an established venue, such as the proposed Vermont Center for Cultural Diversity, can better serve the general public with an ongoing program of events and exhibits.

Plans

At present a working committee is being assembled with various members from the banking/fundraising, academic and business communities under consideration. In the coming months, regular meetings of the working committee will be held to advance the agenda of creating the Vermont Center for Cultural Diversity (VCCD).

One of the first tasks is to register VCCD as a non-profit and in so doing, to secure ownership of the name Vermont Center for Cultural Diversity. (Note: The name has been registered with the office of the Vermont Secretary of State.)

Once our working committee is formed, we will create an overall plan, focusing on our funding needs, both in the short term and long term, and formulate the funding strategy. We will seek both private and public funding. Going hand in hand with the above is clearly defining our vision for such a center. While this may change over time, it is important to be clear about what it is we are aiming for and what is appropriate for a community of our size.

Finally, as a way to generate publicity and interest in the concept, we plan begin in the very near term, within a few months, thus perhaps as much as a year or two before we reach our end goal, with a program of talks, films and other events at local venues. This approach will serve a dual function, as it begins to bring the concept of center for ethnic and cultural diversity into the public consciousness, and it provides a fund-raising opportunity as well.

Jared Gange and Kyendamina Cleoplace Mukeba

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