

MCMR council helps Farmington, Hills work toward inclusion

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER
sbuck@oe.hometown.com

With 84 different languages spoken in the Farmington community, there's a "kaleidoscope of colors," said Samir Haddad, director of bilingual education for the Farmington Public School district.

Haddad made these comments as part of a daylong conference, "Because We Can Change the World: Building an Inclusive Community for Everyone." Held at the Farmington Training Center, the conference drew participants from metro-Detroit.

In his work tracking enrollments of bilingual children, he has seen the number of those students increase over the past decade. The Farmington/Farmington Hills Multicultural/Multiracial Council has helped to further understanding, he said, going the extra step to involve the community.

Haddad wants bilingual students to be more than "welcome" in the community. "Welcome is for guests," he said.

The council has gone from being considered "cute" at its inception to involving groups in meaningful conversations and looking at diversity from an intellectual perspective.

"Feeling different is very painful, especially for kids," Haddad said. "Kids sacrifice their language and their cultural background so as not to look different. The multicultural council has said to them, 'Yes, we accept you as you are.'"

Acceptance not tolerance
Steve Brock, Farmington Hills City Manager, said the goals of the city are to ensure Farmington Hills remains as viable as it is now.

"We want to make sure, from a grassroots level, neighbor to neighbor, that people understand what diversity means and why it is a good thing and not something to be concerned about or fearful of as it was in the past," he said.

Brock said that people might come from places where government isn't trusted. "It's up to us to break down those barriers and get people involved."

Schools have been more successful because parents have a vested interest, he added.

Larry Maloney, a 15-year resident and a member of the MCMR Council who came in as a PTA member, said he has a history of involvement in civil rights organizations. MCMR has used "a smart strategy" of getting powerful people in the community involved with the group, he said.

Farmington School Board member Pam Christian said she joined MCMR not as an elected official but as a member of the community. "On a personal note, the council is important to me because it has provided a place for people who are different," she said.

She felt welcome in the community when her family moved here six years ago at a time when the community wasn't as diverse as it is today. "While I felt welcome, I didn't feel very included," Christian said. She found a "nice dialogue" with the council, which she considers vital and important.

Celebrating diversity
Founded more than 10 years ago in response to diversity issues in the schools, the MCMR offers seminars, community forums and hosts annual events like the Rainbow Recognition

breakfast and Heritage Festival. "Diversity is nurtured and celebrated," said Karen Bolsen of the organization she co-chairs. "There's certain serious issues we discuss, but we also have a lot of fun and a lot of celebration."

MCMR believes in community programs which are acceptable and accepting to all citizens, equal education and employment opportunities, and equal access to housing, she said.

"We believe in the philosophy of bridge building rather than an adversarial approach," Bolsen said. "We try to be proactive. We took these guiding principles and said 'What do we need to do in the way of programming and action planning?'"

One audience member asked if MCMR had a homosexual member or one who represents interests of sexual preference.

Bolsen and Haddad said no. "We don't have a representative from every ethnic organization either but we strive to do that," Bolsen said. "We have a broader membership than we do representation on our council."

Families used to be described as two-parent, two child. "Families today are big, small, extended, multi-generational, one parent," Haddad said. "We become families by birth, by adoption, by marriage. The traditional family has changed. There is no traditional family anymore."

Textbooks also need to change so they don't depict two parents all the time, he said.

Demographics showing up in the schools are a good indication of what the community will look like 10 years from today, Haddad said.

"We are an increasingly aging, an extremely mobile society," Haddad said.

Hills clergy to keynote MCMR's progress report

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Two Farmington Hills clergymen will highlight "A Progress Report to the Community," an annual review of the Farmington/Farmington Hills Multicultural/Multiracial Community Council's programs and activities during the past year.

Rabbi Danny Nevins of Adat Shalom Synagogue and the Rev. Mark Jensen of North Congregational Church will lead this open dialogue at 8 a.m. Thursday, May 9 at the Farmington Training Center, 35000 Thomas Street in downtown Farmington, one block north of Grand River.

The entire community is invited to attend this free event to provide input and feedback. A continental breakfast will be provided.

The council is dedicated to promoting awareness and acceptance of diversity in the community. Questions posed will be:

- What activities and topics were most beneficial?
- To what extent did these activities and programs enhance the council's guiding principles?
- Are there concerns not being addressed?
- What are appropriate goals and activities for the 2002-03 year?
- How can citizens and community groups become more involved in advancing the mission and guiding principles of the MCMR?

Lars Hellsten

personal appearance & Orrefors collection show



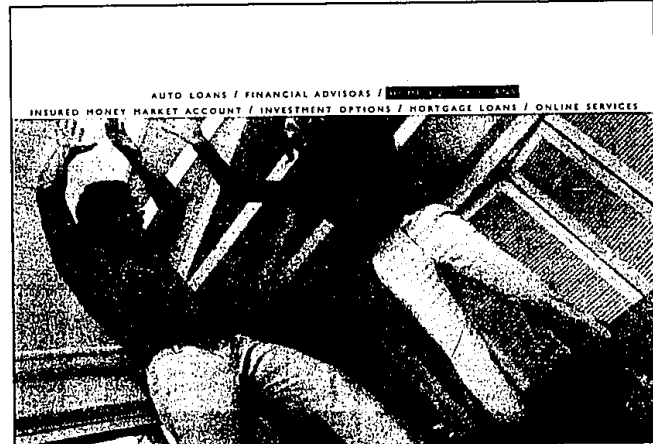
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