

# The Chatham Daily News

## Cultural centres ease transition for immigrants; clubs help new arrivals create a community

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Coming to a new country is a leap of faith for immigrants.

Often they have no family, no friends and - if they are refugees - little or no money.

To many Canadians, an ethnic social club might simply be viewed as a place to rent for wedding receptions or where people of that nationality gather for cultural events.

But to a new immigrant, it is often an important connection to their culture.

These centres are also part of the fabric that immigrants weave to create a community in a new land.

Sonia Valencia-Taylor has lived in Canada for more than 30 years, but she holds on strongly to the traditions of Colombia, the land of her birth.

The Chatham resident said only Spanish is spoken in her home - even by her Canadian-born husband. Latino food is always served and the radio and television are filled with music and programs reflecting her culture, she added.

But Valencia-Taylor is equally passionate about Canada, warning if anyone says a bad thing about this country, they will get an earful from her.

"You can be a faithful Canadian - I love Canada," she said.



Finding a new home - Hassan Elkhodr kneels in prayer in the small mosque on Bloomfield Road for the Friday Khutbah (sermon.)

DIANA MARTIN PHOTO

"But, I think keeping your identity is very important when you're raising a family," Valencia-Taylor said. "It's much easier to be a success when you know who you are."

Although she's only lived in Chatham for less than six months, Valencia-Taylor is working to form a Latino cultural centre, which she has tentatively named "Somos Latinos." This means "We are Latinos."

At this point, she is organizing meetings using free rooms offered to non-profit groups by Chatham Chrysler and the Real Canadian Superstore.

Valencia-Taylor is willing to give her time to make this work, because she remembers the challenges she faced coming to Canada 31 years ago and not knowing where to go for help.

"If I can help people not to struggle as much as I did, I'm more than willing to do it," she said.

In a modest 12-foot by 12-foot structure, located behind a Chatham convenience store, local Muslims gather regularly to pray.

Lebanon-born Hassan Elkhodr said it is common for 20-25 people to squeeze into the prayer room on a Friday for Juman prayers.

He said it is obligatory that Muslims pray in groups on Friday.

"That's all building community," Elkhodr said.

The Muslim faith has followers from many countries, which Elkhodr said are represented by those who take part in prayers. He noted people who have come pray are from Pakistan, India, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan. He added some have also been born in Canada.

Elkhodr said plans are also in the works to build a new Muslim centre.

In the meantime, the culture is being passed on to children through Muslim classes.

"In our religion, it is important to teach your children your values," he said.

Dominic do Forno, who immigrated to Canada at age 11, knows how important a cultural centre is to community building. He attended the founding meeting of the formation of the Portuguese Canadian Social Club, of which his father Antonio became the first president. Do Forno talks with pride about how the social club grew from a two-room clubhouse on Queen Street in Chatham to its current banquet facility, which opened in 1997 on Grand Avenue East.

Although cultural centres are important for building community, do Forno advises ethic

groups to do it themselves, no matter how difficult.

"It's in that struggle that you build the network," he said. "You form that bond that you can go through anything."

Do Forno believes building cultural centres help immigrants embrace their new country.

"There is never a question about where your loyalties are - you're always Canadian," he said. "I think it makes us stronger Canadians when we know where our culture is from."

This is the final story in a three-part series on immigration in Chatham-Kent.

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