

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

From saloon to Catholic girls school, International Institute continues growing

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Staff and volunteers with the International Institute of St. Louis drape a sign on the front of the institute during its first international festival in May 1920. The institute's first office was located on S. Broadway on the second floor, above a saloon. Photo courtesy of the International Institute archives

In the shuttered St. Elizabeth Academy just east of Tower Grove Park, the tiny room with the small window used to be a bathroom, but it will now serve as a prayer room for Muslims.

The room has been emptied, the only addition a bar along one wall to hang prayer rugs.

It's one small, but important addition to what is being prepped as the new home for the International Institute of St. Louis, which has helped more than 20,000 refugees legally resettle into the area by offering English classes and assistance in finding housing and jobs.

At its current location on South Grand Boulevard, the Institute has no designated place for Muslims to pray.

"I'd walk out and see men near the elevator or stairwell, in a corner with a piece of cardboard down, praying," said Anna Crosslin, president and CEO of the Institute, which has been in operation since 1919.

Adding the prayer room points to the ongoing challenges to serve refugees from more than 75 countries, coming to St. Louis with various customs, languages and beliefs. Since moving into its current facility in 1999, the Institute has more than doubled the number of people it serves, to about 7,500 a year.

"We feel we need to be above 12,000, and there is no way we can do that now," Crosslin said.

Crosslin said St. Elizabeth Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school that closed in 2013, seemed too much space for the next move — four times more room. But once she took a tour of the five-building campus, with 132,000 square feet, Crosslin saw the opportunities. The Institute closed on the property in June.

The pews in the chapel, with its stained glass windows highlighting various female saints, have been removed, allowing a meeting room for about 400.

Crosslin said she would like to host annual naturalization ceremonies where new

refugees are encouraged to attend to experience what it's like to become a U.S. citizen.

The Institute also plans to expand on its annual Festival of Nations, providing year-round opportunities at its new headquarters for the public to come learn more about the immigrant groups served.

The gym with its parquet floor, lamella roof and balcony where nuns watched the students play basketball, will serve as a community space, perhaps to be rented out for special events and to charter schools that lack athletic facilities.

An industrial kitchen will serve as a training facility for refugees looking for food service jobs. And the 3.7-acre campus has 100 parking spaces, addressing a shortage at the current site.

The Institute also plans to enhance career development and job training opportunities. The efforts are part of the region's goal to be the fastest-growing metropolitan area for immigrants by 2020.

"If we're going to meet that goal, we have to be able to accelerate how people find jobs," said Betsy Cohen, executive director of St. Louis Mosaic Project, launched in 2012 after an economic impact report showed that the region lags behind the rest of the country in immigrant growth. The report also detailed the economic benefits of increasing the area's foreign-born population.

Crosslin said the Institute wanted to put together a certification program for refugees such as Afghans and Iraqis who worked in war zones with Americans.

Many of them come to the U.S. as professionals, including engineers and doctors, but lack the appropriate credentials to continue in similar professions here. As a result, they, like many refugees, end up taking menial jobs in hotels and casinos.

HITTING THE AIRWAVES

At the new headquarters, the Institute plans to begin running a low-power FM station. The nonprofit has approval for noncommercial programming, with a signal strength expected to reach no more than a few miles in any direction.p:BC body copy 1st graph

Programming is still being worked out, but the Institute plans to collaborate with several agencies including the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan St. Louis and the St. Louis Language Immersion Schools. The new station should be up and running no later than July 1, 2016. The Institute is still deciding on call letters.

Crosslin said that law enforcement and public health officials often wanted to reach out to refugees but that it was difficult to set meetings attracting large groups because of work and family obligations.

The radio station's programs will be promoted during English, citizenship, financial literacy and other classes, so the clients will know it's another avenue to learn what is going on in the community. Some programming will probably be tailored to specific groups of refugees, with the information offered in their native language.

Karlos Ramirez, executive director of the Hispanic chamber, said the station would

provide another opportunity to promote Hispanic-owned businesses as well as the services the city offers to new immigrants.

“It becomes the next step in how we serve,” Crosslin added.

GROWING NUMBERS

The refugee population continues to change, as conflicts around the world provide refugee status to new groups.p:BC body copy 1st graph

In the 1970s, after the Fall of Saigon, the region received a wave of Vietnamese. In the mid-1990s, St. Louis saw thousands of Bosnians arrive, fleeing the former Yugoslavia.

In the past few years, the largest refugee populations have come from Bhutan and Myanmar in Asia and Somalia, Ethiopia and Congo in Africa. Iraqis represented the largest group of refugees in 2009, but those numbers have dropped significantly the past few years. The Institute will begin resettling Syrian refugees within the next year.

“When I arrived in September 1978, we served about 1,200 annually, primarily through our (English as a second language) classes,” Crosslin said. “There was no formal refugee resettlement program in Missouri — that happened in winter 1978-79.”

With immigration reform efforts nationwide and the St. Louis Mosaic Project initiative locally, Crosslin expects the number of clients served each year to reach 12,500 by November 2019, the Institute’s 100th anniversary.

The first offices for the International Institute were on South Broadway, on the second floor above a saloon.

Other locations included a 19th-century mansion in the Central West End, followed by a move to a former warehouse at 3800 Park Avenue in 1982. Seventeen years later, the organization moved to its current location, at 3654 South Grand.

The Institute plans to begin operating Jan. 20 in the old St. Elizabeth Academy, 3401 Arsenal Street. The move is about a mile northeast from the current site.

Before its official move, the nonprofit is hosting a reception and dinner for two staff members from Global Cleveland, a group focused on attracting newcomers — both foreign and native born — and connecting them to social and economic opportunities in a metropolitan area of just more than 2 million people. Cohen said they were coming to learn about similar efforts underway in St. Louis.