



‘Welcome Dayton’ program earns kudos at the White House

Immigrant advocates gather in D.C.

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At 10 a.m. Sept. 19, Dayton native and advocate Thomas Wahlrab brunchd with members of the American Immigration Council on G Street in Washington, D.C. The night before, he had dinner with the Welcoming America staff. Wahlrab was in D.C. to be honored for his leadership role in the “Welcome Dayton” immigrant friendly city program, one of 10 Americans recognized as a Champion of Change for immigrants at the White House.

“It’s an incredible honor, but unnerving,” Wahlrab said, as he waited to be escorted to the White House.

Wahlrab worked with Equal Opportunity Employment in the 1980s, but was at the Dayton Aviation Center when the city’s Human Relations Council needed an executive director.

“I wanted to assist the community,” he said of his decision to apply. “The Human Relations Council responds to issues, mostly about discrimination — and I thought that if conversation could be facilitated in a positive way, it would be better than litigation. I believe in helping people to connect.

“We noticed that immigrants weren’t coming to the council or making complaints, although we knew there were issues,” he said. “That population just didn’t know their rights.

“We went to them and did an anecdotal study on the immigrant population, which is marginalized. There were small organizations and individuals helping them, but HRC was in a position to do something on the community level.

“I met with the city manager and commissioners, and asked what could be better and what was possible,” he said. Three months later, the Welcome Dayton initiative was drawn up and endorsed by the city.

Wahlrab retired in 2012, but continues to volunteer at the Dayton Mediation Center and co-facilitates several Welcome Dayton initiatives. It was his coordinator's role in Welcome Dayton that led to the White House recognition in honor of Citizenship Day and National Welcoming Week.

His accomplishments were observed, along with those of the other nine champions, followed by panel discussions — and bantering about which city was the most “welcoming” — for more than two hours.

“My name came out for this honor, but it's the Dayton community that's responsible,” he said. “There's no fix planned at the national level, but the people honored are doing what they can on a local level.”

Defining the HRC as “the conscience of the community,” during the panel, he noted that “there's pain in our community and we're all compelled to do something about it.”