



## Welcoming immigrants topic of East Toledo forum

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There's a lot of fear about opening our borders: Ebola, terrorism, unaccompanied children fleeing from gang violence in Central America. But, get past the fear and there's opportunity to grow America, and more specifically Northwest Ohio.

The Welcome Toledo-Lucas County Initiative will host its third community conversation about becoming an "immigrant friendly community" Wednesday, 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the East Toledo Family Center. You are invited.

The group aims to allay your fears and present its case that attracting the best and brightest immigrants will enhance social and economic opportunities for all of us.

Pete Gerken, Lucas County commissioner, is on the committee. He is well aware of Toledo's history of "welcoming immigrants. He said in a phone interview last week, "I did 30 years in the Jeep plant. It was like walking into the United Nations. I spent time with Latinos, African-Americans, Lebanese people, Turkish people, Asian folk, young folk, old folk, black folk, brown folk, and they all came from somewhere other than here."

That's true. Consider: The Irish came to Northwest Ohio in the mid 1800s, according to the book *The Irish in Toledo* by Seamus Metress and Molly Schiever. They fled famine and built the canals with picks, shovels and axes. In 1875, Father Patrick O'Brien came to East Toledo and Good Shepherd Catholic Church. Less than 2,000 people lived in East Toledo at the time, but under Fr. O'Brien's leadership, an ethnic neighborhood grew up around the church, the third such Irish neighborhood in Toledo. By 1902, the parish had more than 2,000 members and Irish owned businesses prospered.

The Poles came in two waves from 1880 to 1914, according to the book *Toledo's Nineteenth Century Polonia* by David Gwidon Chelminski. They fled poverty, starvation and military conscription into the Austro-Hungarian army. According to the 1920 census, Toledo was among the top 12 American cities with the largest number of

Polish immigrants.

The Greeks came here in numbers from 1899 to 1906, according to the book, *The Greeks of Toledo* by Michael Vassiliou. They settled in East Toledo around Vinal and Ironwood Streets. Many started small businesses because that was the fastest way to make money. By 1930, Greeks owned some 130 restaurants.

The Hungarians came around 1890, according to the book, *Hungarian American Toledo* edited by Thomas E. Barden and John Ahern. They fled a semi-feudal land system and horrendous working conditions in their home country. The big move was when National Malleable Castings transferred 200 Hungarian workers from its Cleveland factory to a new factory in the Birmingham neighborhood.

Arabs, mainly Christians from what is now Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, also arrived around the turn of the 20th century. They came to avoid religious persecution or military conscription, according to the book *Arab Americans in Toledo* edited by Samir Abu-Absi. Many went into the food or restaurant business.

Arabs who practice Islam are also welcome. The Islamic Center of Greater Toledo in Perrysburg is one of only 1,200 mosques in the United States. And, Buckeye Cablevision was a broadcasting pioneer when it chose to air Al Jazeera English, the Arab broadcast news channel.

Mix in the Hispanics, Germans and the other ethnic and racial groups I've failed to mention and Toledo is the rare small city with a big city tenor. Most of us welcome and celebrate this symphonic diversity. We are enriched by what each ethnic group contributes to our culture.

Cindy Geronimo, vice president of the Lucas County Land Bank, sees smart immigration as a way to rehab the city's housing stock and repopulate neighborhoods. "You hear the negatives, but there are a lot of deep roots in our neighborhoods and people are proud of their history. This is an opportunity to remind people what that means."

Smart immigration will add to our enjoyment of cultural diversity through new foods, customs and festivals.

So, what is smart immigration?

Commissioner Gerken says Lucas County will work to create a clearing house of services for new immigrants. These would include language services; job and family services; and information on schools and available housing. Once that is done, the committee will brand and promote Lucas County as an immigrant friendly community

through the United States State Department.

But first, the welcoming committee wants to engage and educate you through a series of community conversations.

“There are high-skill, high-talented immigrants coming to America. We want to attract that talent here... We want to make sure people understand a Welcoming Community brings people in to create jobs; brings people in to live in their neighborhoods where there has been neighborhood flight; brings people in to lift up the quality of life... But, in every community we have talked to, we have to fight the negative belief of ‘You want to take what I ain’t got already.’”

The welcoming committee hopes these conversations will help overcome the demonization of “them” by the few bigots among “us.”

RSVP to Sarah Allan at [sallan@co.lucas.oh.us](mailto:sallan@co.lucas.oh.us), but I don’t think they’ll turn you away if you just show up. It is a welcoming committee.

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