

Fitting in



From left are Manolo and Yadira Morales, who are pictured after receiving their Maryland driver's license; and their son Brayán Morales.



Coach Jimmy Monroy and Assistant Coach Jose Pena are pictured with their soccer team, including Crystal Hernandez, Guillermo Jara, Jesus Ramos, Edwin Hurtado, Jassid Ulloa, Erick Portillo, Julius James, Milca Barrios, Enly Vasquez, Gil Lovo and Jimmy Monroy. Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center sponsored spring and fall teams with the Talbot County Department of Parks and Recreation and the YMCA.



From left are Cub Scouts Ricardo Guerrero and Joel Fernandez; Nestor Fernandez, father of Joel Fernandez; and Scout Eduardo Diaz and his sister Guisel Diaz, with their mother, Maria Chavero. The group was helping to fundraise for Cub Scout Pack 003 during the Scouts annual popcorn sale.

Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center helps immigrant community feel at home

By **KATIE WILLIS**
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EASTON — After becoming a Board of Immigration Appeals accredited representative May 17, Matthew Peters, director of Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center at 20 Bay St., Easton, said his goal is to develop a regional immigration clinic, to make sure the needs of the foreign-born population on the Mid-Shore are being addressed, and to help immigrants integrate their families into the community.

“On the Eastern Shore, we have a huge immigrant community now,” Peters said. “It’s increasing, and it’s having a huge impact.”

Peters said the state average indicates about 15 percent of Maryland is foreign-born. He said, about 8 percent of the Eastern Shore’s population is foreign-born, but with the children of recent immigrants added, the number is closer to the state average, locally. Twenty years ago, he said, only 2 percent of the population on the Eastern Shore was foreign-born.

“Immigrants come in, they take risks, they take jobs no one wants, they build an economy around them, out of necessity. They are injecting a lot of income into this community, and work and human resources,” Peters said.

Peters said CMRC’s work is about getting the immigrant community off on the right foot, as quickly as possible.

“You know, it’s a new world — it’s a new system, it’s a new process, it’s a new language — everything’s new,” Peters said.

Board of Immigration Appeals representatives are approved members of nonprofit, religious, social service or charitable organizations, and regarded as advocates for foreign-born individuals. Accredited individuals and organizations also may represent someone before immigration courts, the Board of Immigration Appeals and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, part of the Department of Homeland Security.

In Peters’ case, since he is not an attorney, he said he is not legally allowed to represent someone in court, however CMRC now is legally authorized to do immigration work, and he said he is able to assist with everything except representing someone in court. He said some immigration work needs to be completed by an attorney, but most does not.

“For our clients, probably about 90 percent of the work, we can now do,” Peters said. “Any type of legal advice, consultations, form-filing, representing them as we’re doing forms — that we can do now, legally. So that’s going to be a huge resource for this community.”

Since, CMRC’s inception in 2012, Peters said youth development within the immigrant community, through an after-school program held at Easton Elementary School,



Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center Director Matthew Peters works with clients on immigration issues at the organization’s office at 20 Bay St., Easton.

has been a priority.

“That’s kind of where we got our foothold here in the community,” said Peters. “The easiest way to start (engaging the immigrant population) was through the children.”

The program eventually grew into a partnership with Talbot County Public Schools. The program provides after-school education to about 120 children a year, and is run concurrently with the academic year.

Peters said the idea behind the program is to identify students who are struggling, and improve both reading levels and Maryland standardized test scores. He said programming is designed to educate, but is taught in a fun, engaging way.

From the after-school program, partnerships have developed between CMRC, the YMCA of the Chesapeake and local Scouting organizations, Peters said.

“We’re trying to get as many partners in so that we can connect to these families that traditionally haven’t been getting connected to these youth programs,” Peters said.

Peters said after successfully engaging the children of the Mid-Shore’s foreign-born community, he realized there were gaps in services to immigrant parents, as well as a lack of engagement with the adult immigrant community.

“We have services,” Peters said. “I don’t think anyone, in Talbot County especially, is clamoring for more services we don’t have. But when we looked at the immigrant community, we saw big gaps in getting participants connected to these services.”

For instance, Peters said, there are no immigration lawyers locally, the closest being in Washington,



Edwin Hurtado shows off his U.S. citizenship certification. Hurtado received assistance from Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center in obtaining this milestone. His three children, who are participants in CMRC’s after-school program, were granted U.S. citizenship upon their father receiving his citizenship.

D.C., and the closest immigration clinics are located in Salisbury and Baltimore, which can be costly when transportation is added into the equation.

“It’s like a desert here,” Peters said. “Immigration law is not like civil law here, where you can get pro bono lawyers a lot of times, or you are even guaranteed in criminal court, a lawyer ... with immigration, you’re not given those same things.”

Peters said most of CMRC’s clients also have had to spend enormous amounts of money to both connect with attorneys and pay attorney’s fees, to do a lot of the work Peters now can complete for them for free or for a small fee.

He said, the idea is to keep the money that immigrants once need-

ed to invest in their immigration, here on the Mid-Shore, investing it in the community. Recently, Peters said, CMRC helped a woman renew some annual forms for free — a service an attorney likely would charge more than \$500 to complete, per year.

“The next day, we saw new clothes for the children. That goes right to this local economy. They were signed up for summer programs at the YMCA — money that goes right into the community,” Peters said. “When we’re able to free up that money, it’s invested well, back into this community.”

Because everyone’s situation is different and complex, and because translator services are costly and sparse, Peters said, many immigrants do not seek the guid-

ance necessary to fix small issues before they become overwhelming.

He said, CMRC used to work with a local lawyer to provide free clinics and legal advice to the local immigrant community, but the lawyer recently left his practice. The need to become BIA accredited became immediate, Peters said.

The next step will be to gain support, to be able to continue to assist with local immigration law needs, which could mean securing accreditation for other people, Peters said.

“We want to set up a regional clinic, so we can reach out to Caroline County, Dorchester County and Queen Anne’s County,” Peters said. “It’s the same story in those regions, as well.”

Peters said CMRC is getting better at reaching immigrant community members, through trust, word-of-mouth and experience.

“We weren’t good at walking (the immigrant population) through (the immigration) process. And that took time and that took experience,” Peters said.

Peters said he tries to walk through each part of the immigration process himself, so he knows how to communicate the process to others, including where to park if traveling is required, what the building and office look like, what the wait time may be for certain services and what information to bring.

Peters said he also will look over paperwork a client has received, discuss whether or not to hire an attorney, help clients search for an attorney, help enroll children in school, help parents apply for free meal assistance for school-age children, direct parents to where to get necessary vaccines, help immigrants find a primary care doctor, as well as get an ID or a driver’s license.

“I mean, it’s overwhelming,” Peters said. “So, we’re able to kind of help them put that jigsaw puzzle together, piece by piece.”

Peters said, he sees positive changes from immigrants who are able to get over some of the hurdles of becoming a member of the community. Those who get their driver’s license are viewed as leaders in the community, he said, and are able to provide transportation to school for more rural immigrant families. He said they also are not afraid to drive as far, which means better-paying jobs and more income injected into the Mid-Shore community.

“Immigration is the toughest, most difficult and most complex,” Peters said. “But now we’re able to address that ... It’s a right that everyone should have access to; to free legal counsel, at least, or information.”

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