

# Compassionate CHOICE

*One man's service to the Mid-Shore's immigrant community*

BY AMELIA BLADES STEWARD | PHOTOS BY CAROLINE J. PHILLIPS

**"If I hadn't had my journey,** I may have the same opinion as many others have about the immigrant community on the Mid Shore," says Matthew R. Peters, Executive Director of Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center (ChesMRC).

After having spent 13 years working and living in rural Guatemala, Peters has brought a unique point of view concerning the problems and issues that the immigrant community on the Eastern Shore is facing and has a long record of helping those most in need.

"At ChesMRC, our staff has intimate connections to the immigrant community — the vast majority of the population don't have these same connections. My personal connections have made me more compassionate."

After completing a Forestry degree at Penn State University in 1997, followed by a brief service with the U.S. Forest Service and Oregon State, Peters joined the Peace Corps in 1999 so he could experience the forests and jungles of another part of the world. He was drawn to the ecology part of forestry and the experimental work being done, as well as how to keep forests unique.

Reflecting on his choice then, he quipped, "With the Peace Corps, I thought you didn't have to deal with people, just the science of forests. Little did I know."

When he got assigned to Guatemala, he was told the jungle there was too dangerous and isolated, but by 2000, he had pushed to get into the jungle region, hoping it would offer him a unique experience.

"It felt like rural camping. Very few houses had electricity or running water. I was used to living in these surroundings from my Boy Scouts and U.S. Forest Service years. It became very fun," he added.

Matthew worked on reforestation projects in communities and eventually worked with his town manager in Guatemala to reforest a 150-acre piece of land, experimenting with different reforestation styles and increasing diversity in the forests there. In 2001, his two-year commitment to the Peace Corps ended and he made an agreement with the town to stay, coming back to the U.S. to raise enough money to support his work.

After returning to Guatemala to complete his reforestation project, he had an epiphany about his work.

He recalls, "Someone kept coming and cutting down all my trees after they were planted. I remember that I got angry, then I realized that the people there were threatened by me. I represented their fears of people taking over their land. I was coming at the problem all the wrong way. That was the day I shifted from planting the trees to working with the people on the issues in their town."

In 2002, Peters decided to start a nonprofit organization, Volunteer Peten, developing educational programs for volunteers focusing on natural resource management. The organization trained over 1,000 international volunteers and hosted 90 volunteers a month to come help with the project as mission teams.



Matthew Peters,  
Executive Director  
of Chesapeake  
Multicultural  
Resource Center, in  
his Easton office



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Because 80 percent of the people in the jungle region were illiterate, the organization eventually raised enough money to build a preschool and high school for the town, as well as a library.

Between 2009 and 2010, the drug cartels moved into the town and the Mayor was kidnapped and murdered. By this time, transportation had improved in Guatemala and people began leaving for the U.S. for economic opportunity, leaving their children with relatives in Guatemala and sending back money as they could.

He recalls, "We had never had guns in the region, and I started seeing more guns. I even had to tell people who came into the library to leave who were carrying guns."

In 2011, there was a massacre in the region of 27 farmers by one drug cartel to show another drug cartel they had the power and land in the town. With a limited number of volunteers and declining donations, Peters was forced to close down the nonprofit in 2012. Afterward, he came back to his sister's house on Kent Island. That year, he met with a group at Oasis Covenant Church in Easton, including ChesMRC founders Kevin Rosenthal and Peter Burns, to help get immigrants in the area skilled jobs.

"We started with the school first and developed an afterschool program. I hadn't lived here, so I didn't know anyone. The first person I met at the Back to School Night that year was an immigrant who came from a region in Guatemala. I could tell them all the changes that had occurred since they had left Guatemala. At the end of that night, we had 30 people signed up for the afterschool program," he said.

In 2013 and 2014 the Mid Shore experienced an increase in immigrants from Central America, including Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, due to the violence, corruption, land grabbing, and poverty in their homelands. In 2019, the next surge of immigrants came to the Mid Shore and ChesMRC was seeing five families a week, with only a small percentage from Mexico.

"Violence is the norm in their lives. It has changed people's dreams and has beaten people down. I remember when it was a different place," he comments.

He adds, "Each immigrant story is different. We are here to listen. I think people feel comfortable sharing with me because I am not shocked. I feel blessed to hear these stories so I can help them move forward."

The mission of ChesMRC is to empower people from different cultures to become successful and engaged members of the community. While the organization serves anyone who requests assistance, its primary focus is to help Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals to successfully integrate into the community.

One of ChesMRC's key objectives is to connect this vulnerable population to the existing network of public and private service providers. ChesMRC became a Department of Justice (DOJ) accredited organization in 2016 and can directly assist, without the need for a lawyer, some immigration cases. ChesMRC also became a Certified Application Counselor (CAC) organization and can directly enroll or renew families into Medicaid and health insurance plans.



He is beginning to work more with the Pakistani and Haitian communities, visiting Federalsburg once a week to offer services. He adds, "They are now feeling more comfortable coming to me and I can help them navigate. There is no point of judgment."

"We need to educate the community as quickly as possible so that they can learn more about the people coming here — getting to know them and listening to them is very important. Being an immigrant is a unique experience. It's something we can all relate to because it's part of our DNA as Americans."

Matthew points to taking away such labels "undocumented" and "illegal" as they don't point to someone's character and are not a permanent mark on someone's head, adding "We don't know who anyone will be in five years."

"We need to focus on connecting these immigrants to the resources, training, and education to keep them safe, healthy, education and contributing to our communities. It's only going to create a



better world in the end, even if they go back to their communities," he added.

His father, an engineer, influenced his work ethic of learning to do things himself. He comments, "Ambition is service. It has become my daily walk — I am following what I need to do and that is to serve my fellow man."

*Since its inception in September 2012, ChesMRC has provided services to more than 4,000 non-English speakers in Talbot and surrounding counties, involving over 6,500 separate requests for information and referral.* ●

OPPOSITE: Peters in Guatemala in 2001

TOP: Peters, center, reviews a report with Victoria Gomez Lozano and Benjamin Perez Ramos

ABOVE: The Venezuelan flag is a strong emblem of the work being done at ChesMRC.