



Ethnic Support Council:
Helping People Understand Each Other
Bill Reade Executive Director

LCC lecture series “Community Partnerships”
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Presentation Script:

This series is entitled Community Partnerships and there is one local agency that has done much to foster partnerships - namely your local United Way. Of the nine agencies featured in this series, seven are either currently receiving support from United Way or have done so in recent years. So if you are at all impressed with what these agencies are achieving you have to give some of the credit to United Way, without which some may not exist, including Ethnic Support Council.

In fact my first contact with ESC was as their liaison with United Way when I joined the United Way board in 1997, and attended ESC’s board meetings. I remember my first meeting well. It was certainly a diverse group with people of Hispanic, Vietnamese, Laotian, Filipino, Korean, Native American, and African American, descent. There was one lady who sounded as though she was from New York. And I added to the diversity since I was the only one there from England.

In 1998 I was invited to join the board and I have been involved ever since, as board member, treasurer, interim director and now as Executive Director

I see Ethnic Support Council as having a two-fold role. The first relates to diversity.

On the letterhead of ESC’s stationery is the motto “...bringing people together”, but we are in the process of switching to the motto “Embracing Diversity”. Neither slogan gives much of a clue as to what ESC is supposed to be doing, but the newer one does at least define the goal of one part of our mission namely “Educating the public about cultural diversity” and “Providing forums for discussion of ethnic and cultural issues” and “Educating service providers to enable them to better serve minority populations”

So what do we mean by diversity and why should we be embracing it? Webster’s dictionary defines diversity simply as “the condition of being different”.

Sandy Haas one of the early stalwarts of Ethnic Support Council gave me these thoughts about diversity.

“Diversity is an ethic based on the belief that diverse backgrounds, values, opinions and behaviors have a desired and positive effect on a community. Understanding and valuing diversity creates a climate which is empowering, creative and collaborative – and affirms that each citizen is a contributor to the community. Diversity is valued not because it is mandated by law, but because diversity strengthens the community and helps develop and make use of each individual’s skills and talents. A valued and diverse citizenry working together is the cornerstone of an equitable and productive community”

Or more succinctly “Valuing diversity is essential for survival.”

In 1991 just two years after ESC began, Sandy was one of those who started Ethnic Support Council’s International Festival. Sandy worked with Dung Vo, a Vietnamese refugee, to start the International Festival. The initial purpose was to provide a free family-oriented multi-cultural experience for the people of Longview and Kelso and specifically for children. The first festival, held in Kelso’s Tam O’ Shanter Park, featured locally based entertainers who volunteered to perform for free. In later years, the committee raised money to pay for local and regional advertising and performers from Seattle to Portland.

In addition to entertainers the festival gave local agencies the opportunity to showcase their activities and services, especially those relating to cultural diversity, as well as seek new volunteers. Then as now there was the requirement that information booths should provide free activities for children.

Vendors of ethnic items and purveyors of ethnic food were encouraged at an early stage. After two years, the festival was moved to LCC’s student center where it has remained ever since. This provided an opportunity to partner with LCC’s Multicultural Students in Unity, which is now known as the LCC Multicultural Club, and other college groups interested in diversity. The festival has also been used as an opportunity to teach about diversity issues. In the mid-1990s, diversity classes and seminars were held on campus the day of the International Festival.

After the festival moved to the LCC campus, Cindy Lopez Werth became the driving force behind the festival and the 21st festival was held this year with plans already started for next year.

When 21st Century Grant funding became available to the school districts, ESC partnered with Kelso School District for the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years to put on Family Culture Nights each month at Coweeman Junior High School (now called Coweeman Middle School). These featured different continents, countries or cultures with sharing of song, dance, cultural traditions, games and food presented by members of those cultures or others who had experienced those cultures first hand. Children and families learned about Africa, Asia, Cambodia, Finland, Hawaii, India, Norway, Russia and USA (Native American culture).

In 2005 and 2006, ESC partnered with the Drug-Free Communities and provided Family Culture Nights at Monticello Middle School in the Longview School District.

ESC has also partnered with Longview Parks & Recreation to provide week-long Around the World geography and cultural diversity classes for children during the spring or summer breaks.

Even our annual International Dinner and Auction, our principal fund-raiser, aims to educate as well as entertain. For the last several years we have picked a specific country or culture as the theme for the event and tried to showcase the culture of the region as well as the cuisine. Our 15th International Dinner and Auction held just last month celebrated the culture of Vietnam.

In December 2007, Ethnic Support Council worked with area churches and individuals to organize a diversity rally in Longview to oppose a meeting by a racist group, the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. On a cold and snowy day, approximately 500 community members attended the rally to show they appreciate diversity. The racist group, which was linked to Aryan Nations and various Neo-Nazi groups, had about 50 members in attendance and its attempt to start a regular church in the area failed. ESC also distributed Embrace Diversity bracelets and flyers before and after the event.

Another time, the Ethnic Support Council organized a group of volunteers to paint over racist graffiti in Longview to show the community that type of criminal activity is not acceptable.

The other side of ESC's activities is centered on the "Helping People" part of the lecture title.

Ethnic Support Council was started in 1989 mainly by immigrants from South East Asia, primarily Vietnam and Cambodia with help from local advocates from the community. Many of these immigrants were refugees and federal money was available to assist them in getting established in their new communities.

At that time, the program was called Ethnic Community Services and was under the umbrella of what we now know as Lower Columbia CAP. The program was housed in the CAP building on Commerce Avenue in Longview. After three or four years, ESC moved out and began renting a small office space from Longview Community Church at 1801 Hudson Street in Longview. Interestingly it moved back into the CAP building as a tenant from 2005 to 2009. Today we are housed in a small office at 311 Oak Street in Kelso.

ESC successfully applied for non-profit status and become an agency in its own right in 1993, and adopted the name Ethnic Support Council to eliminate confusion over multiple other names that had been in use.

The integration of these newcomers from Asia appears for whatever reason to have been successful and they and their second and third generation offspring are part of the mainstream of Cowlitz County residents.

Another wave of refugees to Southwest WA resulted from the break up of the former Soviet Union and a significant population of those from Russia and Ukraine moved into the area. ESC played only a limited role in helping these people, probably because we just didn't have any office volunteers who spoke the language and we were able to refer them to other resources. Also, most immigrants from Russia and Ukraine relocated to the Vancouver and Portland areas although some have settled in Cowlitz County.

In the early years, the office was staffed by a part-time office manager/director, volunteers and part-time LCC work-study students. At one time the office had on staff LCC students from Cambodia, Russia and Vietnam, as well as Spanish-speaking students. During that time, the office drew more clients from Cambodia, Russia or Vietnam because the students were bilingual and able to help them.

The college was able to reimburse ESC 80 % of the work-study students' salaries. Later, the reimbursement percentages were lower and lower due to budget cuts. Eventually, the work-study program was scaled back so much that ESC was no longer able to afford hiring students. Around the same time, the need increased for service to Spanish-speaking clients.

According to the 2010 US census 7,975 residents of Cowlitz County identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino, 7.8% of those who completed the census. The equivalent numbers for 2000 were 6,523 and 6.5%. As you can see that means our Hispanic population is increasing at a greater rate than non-Hispanics. However even at that rate we can expect Cowlitz County to remain a predominately English-Speaking community for the foreseeable future. (We must bear in mind by the way that some Hispanic or Latino residents may not have completed the census. Also many of those who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino do communicate perfectly well in English.) Contrast that with Yakima County WA where the latest census shows that 45% of the residents identified themselves as Hispanic. The ability of a native Spanish speaker in Cowlitz County to find help is obviously different from one in Yakima. I am not qualified to discuss the ramifications of this except to say that the staff of ESC's office makes approximately 6,000 contacts per year with people who seek our help because of their lack of proficiency in English. Think about that number – it works out at around 24 per day. If you come onto our office at a busy period you may see four clients being helped in person and four more waiting to be served.

But what do we actually do you may well ask.

We operate an office that is open from 9 to 5 Monday to Friday staffed by people bilingual in English and Spanish and with access to resources to provide help to those who seek it. Today we have two full time paid employees, and two members of Cowlitz AmeriCorps. From time to time we have other helpers in the office including volunteers, people performing community service, and people assigned by WorkSource or CAP to gain work experience. Usually these folks are not bilingual but serve as support to the bilingual staff. None of those listed includes

the director whose job is essentially administrative and not involved with the clients. Quite a far cry from the days when we just had a part-time director and any volunteers we could rope in

I'd like to take a moment to mention the great benefit to Cowlitz County provided by Cowlitz AmeriCorps, another organization that has done much to foster Community Partnerships. The AmeriCorps program was brought into being by Federal legislation in 1993. The program in Cowlitz County began in 2000 and since then 252 people have served as AmeriCorps members. 414,000 hours have been dedicated to service in our communities with a dollar value estimated at over 7.7 million. This year which runs from September 2011 to July 2012 ESC will have the services of essentially two full-time employees. This year 23 different agencies will benefit from the service of one or more of these highly motivated individuals.

Unfortunately the AmeriCorps program is currently under threat. The House of Representatives has recently issued draft legislation to shut down the Corporation for National and Community Service and eliminate funding for AmeriCorps. You can find more information about this issue on the internet at www.saveservice.org. ESC and other agencies would be seriously hampered in providing service to our clients without our AmeriCorps members. (I have some cards with the website address on, and also a link to write a letter to your representative.)

But back to ESC. Not only do we help people with limited English skills; we also help the agencies, schools, businesses and governmental agencies that serve them. We help find interpreters to accompany clients to appointments with doctors, attorneys, counselors etc. The request may originate with the client or it may be the attorney or care provider who contacts us for help. At one time ESC was reimbursed for many of our translating assignments, but income from interpreting has declined significantly for a variety of reasons. However, we strive never to decline the opportunity to interpret - as a service to the client. We also can often provide interpreting over the phone. If you have a speaker or conference capability on your phone, we can help you communicate with your client or customer. Our present staff can only help interpret to and from Spanish, but we help find interpreters for other languages if requested.

We help with translations of letters, papers, records and other documents. Also, we can help to complete applications for jobs, for renting a home and more.

We provide help to obtain resources like food, clothes, housing, medical treatment, employment or other services, either on the telephone or in person in the office.

We also have an advocate trained to provide help to victims of sexual assault or domestic violence. Quite often we provide help or advice that might appear trivial, but for those who have not mastered English, even simple problems can seem insurmountable without help.

In collaboration with the Emergency Support Shelter, we publish the quarterly newsletter **¿Qué Pasa?** This is a 4-page bulletin in Spanish mailed out to about 500 and handed out in our office. Each edition leads with an article about some aspect of victimization. Recent

topics have been on intimidation by computer, texting sexual messages and images, and human trafficking. It also includes other items of interest to the Hispanic community.

I wanted to say a little about how we are funded. As far as we are aware none of our clients can claim refugee status. If they did we would refer them to an attorney. So no federal funding is currently available to help our clients. And apart from a grant from the City of Longview's tourism budget to help support the International Festival, we do not receive any funding from the local county or city governments. We do however receive a state grant from OCVA which represents 31% of our income and a United Way grant of about 20%. Fees we received for interpreting that were once a significant part of our income are now less than 4%. But we are able to keep our doors open thanks to the generous help of our local residents. In our last complete financial year we received nearly 46% of our income from fundraisers and donations. This includes nearly \$9,000 that our clients put in donation jars in the office.

I'll begin my wrap-up by saying what I would like to see in the future for Ethnic Support Council. And although a significant part of my job is asking people for money – I'm not going to ask for money. We keep hearing from the media that immigration is on the decline, but we aren't seeing it yet. We are still quite busy. We have a hard-working board of directors who are deeply committed to the goals of ESC and have successfully navigated us through some difficult times.

Our current board is quite small, too small to take on any big new projects. Other than the International Festival we have not been as active as in the past in promoting the value of diversity. Whether we do broaden our current mission depends on the energy and passion of any new board members or volunteers who join us. Any organization needs transfusions of new blood to keep it alive and growing, and recently we have lost several board members for a variety of reasons. We are currently looking at ways to attract individuals who value diversity, especially those from ethnically diverse backgrounds, and I couldn't miss the opportunity to say that if any members of the audience would like to join us please pick up a brochure and feel free to call me or Cindy Lopez Werth the president of our board. Or come to our next meeting on Wednesday November 9 at 6 PM in the office at 311 Oak Street in Kelso.

I'll close by taking questions, but let me ask the audience a question first. Where do you think Ethnic Support Council should be going?

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