



Building Bridges Building Bridges

JULY 2009

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Executive Director's Message

Welcome to FIRN's quarterly newsletter, "Building Bridges". Every issue builds upon FIRN's theme of "bridging cultures and building community" to highlight FIRN news, including upcoming events and client success stories. Our April issue was canceled due to funding cutbacks that left us short-staffed. This current issue will bring you up-to-date on the growing successes – and challenges – faced by FIRN and our foreign-born neighbors. Read about how FIRN surpassed all expectations in FY09 with a talented core staff, increased volunteerism, and innovative approaches to serving the foreign born.

FIRN begins FY 2010 with key grant support for which we are very thankful! In addition to corporate sponsors noted throughout this newsletter, the Howard County government (Department of Citizen Services and Local Children's Board) has re-committed major funding for FIRN's core services. The Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene renewed its grant for health-related minority outreach and technical assistance, including expansion of the FIRN Coalition. Operating grants from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Rouse Company Foundation and the Rotary Club of Columbia-Patuxent will help FIRN meet growing client needs, and the Women's Giving Circle is again providing emergency grant funds for foreign-born women and children. Howard Community College

has become the new lead partner for FIRN's employment counseling program with Pinnacle Career Resources, thanks to continuing grant support from the Howard County Housing Department.

How you can help: Please tell your friends, colleagues and neighbors about FIRN! Ask your employer to match your donations and reward your volunteerism! Help recruit other supporters! Refer clients to FIRN! Share this newsletter and urge them to visit FIRN's website at (www.firnonline.org).

We need you more than ever!!

Jennifer L. Blake
Executive Director

A BANNER YEAR FOR FIRN

FIRN surpassed all expectations in FY09 by handling 8,561 information and referral requests (79% more than in FY08); providing immigration, social service and employment counseling to 3,993 clients (86% more than in FY08); helping 100 children and 74 adults to improve their English; and fulfilling 98% of requests for skilled medical interpreters. FIRN's small staff was assisted by 236 volunteers who devoted over 10,000 hours of service – a 43% increase over FY08! FIRN's annual International Gala in the fall and American Success Awards banquet in marked opportunities to honor outstanding foreign- born

business/community leaders; appreciate FIRN's many corporate sponsors; and support FIRN's core services. FIRN also launched a new Community Outreach Workers model to reach more deeply into the foreign-born communities of Howard County. Thanks to all who made this banner year possible!

How you can help: Volunteer! Increase your donations! Become a FIRN Sponsor! Attend FIRN's International Gala and ASA Banquet! Regularly check FIRN's website www.firnonline.org for unique ways YOU can make a difference.

AMERICAN SUCCESS AWARD

Nearly 180 FIRN supporters turned out for our annual American Success Awards banquet on May 6, 2009 at the Ten Oaks Ballroom in Clarksville. The event – a partnership with the Howard County Government, Howard County Economic Development Authority and the Howard County Chamber of Commerce – honored three ASA Awardees: Lily Bengfort (CenGen, Inc.), Yifei Gan (Howard Community College), and Reverend Young S. Song (Church of Phillipi) for their outstanding business /professional achievements and volunteer service in Howard County. In addition, the Howard County Chamber of Commerce presented its Emerging Success Award to Leena Shrestha (Pen Boutique Ltd.).



Honorees: Yifei Gan, Leena Shrestha, Rev. Young S. Song and Lily Bengfort

How you can help: Nominate your favorite candidate for a 2010 ASA Award (info will be posted on FIRN's website www.firnonline.org in December/January 2009).

FIRN ACKNOWLEDGED THE FOLLOWING SPONSORS AT THE ASA BANQUET

SILVER \$2500

Ascend One Corporation
Howard County General Hospital

BRONZE \$1000

Allen and Shariff Corporation
PNC Bank

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CenGen, Inc.
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IN-KIND SPONSORS

Columbia Minuteman Press
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Patuxent Publishing
Star Hotels
The Business Monthly

IMMIGRATION REFORM: THOUGHTS OF AN IMMIGRATION COUNSELOR BY: WALTER RODRIGUEZ

Between 12 and 15 million unauthorized individuals reside and work in the United States. They come from throughout the world and vary considerably by education level, profession and skill level. They are no more criminals or terrorists than the rest of us; they simply are trying to earn a living and provide opportunities for their families. Contributing to the rich diversity of our communities, they support our economy through their willingness to work in any type of job under dire conditions while paying income, sales and real estate taxes and contributing to the Social Security system.

The undocumented live in constant fear of deportation, making them vulnerable to unscrupulous employers and criminals who take advantage of their reluctance to report crime and abuse. Most were legally documented when they first arrive in the U.S. but have lost their legal status – sometimes many years after establishing their lives and careers here, bearing children who are U.S. citizens, and becoming ensnarled in a long and frustrating quest to remain here.

As a FIRN Immigration Counselor, I know how broken the current immigration system is. For example, family reunification takes far longer than is humane. A U.S. citizen from the Philippines must wait 23 years for a brother or sister to immigrate to the U.S. From most other countries, the wait is 11 years. To be reunited with a married son or daughter over 21 years old requires a 9-year wait. U.S. businesses are also ill-served by the system. In normal economic times, the number of employment-based visas falls far short of the need to fill jobs in the U.S. that require specialized training or carry difficult conditions that U.S. residents and/or citizens are either not able or willing to meet.

To make our communities safer, stronger and more just, immigration reform must benefit our entire society. To avoid creating a sub-class, immigration reform must be inclusive and not excessively punitive. Immigrants are willing to work their way up – not seeking charity – on a path that affords all of the rights and responsibilities that reflect the values of our great nation.

FIRN'S NEW COMMUNITY OUTREACH WORK MODEL

During April-June 2009, FIRN designed and piloted a new "Community Outreach Worker" model to reach Howard County's diverse foreign-born population. At the heart of the model are culturally-competent independent contractors who serve as Community Outreach Workers. FIRN trained these to help implement a Smoke-Free Initiative within their respective foreign-born populations. The Community Outreach Workers canvassed corners of their communities frequented by African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, at-risk youth/adults, pregnant women, the medically underserved and the un/underinsured. Outreach events were conducted at places of worship, libraries, private gatherings, business meetings, health fairs, social/cultural centers, FIRN workshops

and other venues. FIRN's minority outreach/education model was an overwhelming success on every measure. In only three months:

- **4,071** individuals learned about the dangers of second-hand smoke!
- **1,559** individuals signed smoke-free pledges to make their homes and cars smoke-free zones – surpassing goals by 56%!
- **93** individuals were referred by FIRN to the Howard County Health Department's free smoking cessation classes – surpassing goals by 210%!

How you can help: Contract with FIRN to help your organization connect with the richly diverse foreign-born community! Also, consider becoming a FIRN Community Outreach Worker!

CLUB LEAP NEWS

Thanks to generous grants from the Local Children's Board, Verizon Foundation and Comcast Foundation, FIRN expanded Club LEAP by 45% during the 2008-09 school year. Our 5-year partnership with the Howard County Public School System helps the most at-risk ESOL students improve their English proficiency and become acclimated to American school culture. During FY09, Club LEAP recruited, trained, placed and supported 52 volunteer tutors to help 100 students at 8 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and one high school. Of this diverse group of students (2 African, 48 Asian, 42 Hispanic and 8 multi-racial), 57% measurably improved their English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Of these, over 28% increased their English proficiency by two or more levels. Moreover, the number of students at intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency increased 76%!! Kudos to our Club LEAP tutors and students!

Club LEAP opens the door to a brighter future for children like "Farta", a 5th grade student at Bollman Bridge Elementary School who emailed her tutor the day after Club LEAP ended and said how much she "missed Miss Carol." This simple message spoke volumes about the giant leap this young girl had taken since her family had fled Malaysian refugee camps, eventually resettling in Howard County in Fall 2007. It represents the resumption of her formal education; her accomplishments in adjusting to a new culture with different language, customs, and technology, and her ability to once again safely bond with someone outside of her family in a positive and enriching way.

How you can help: Become a tutor! Help FIRN find corporate sponsors for Club LEAP!

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

In April, Shayna Wise, a Club LEAP intern from Howard Community College, was selected from nearly 1,500 nominees to the prestigious All-USA First Team for Community Colleges sponsored by USA Today, the American Association of Community Colleges, and Phi Theta Kappa. As top scorer in the State of Maryland for the national competition, she was named the 2009 New Century Scholar for the State of Maryland. Her winning application included an extensive essay about her work at FIRN assisting with Club LEAP program administration and volunteering as a tutor with many Burmese students in Club LEAP. Shayna received an academic scholarship from the Coca-Cola Corporation, and Phi Theta Kappa, and USA Today published a feature story about the All-USA First Team and its 12 nationwide winners, including Shayna's story and mentioning FIRN's Club LEAP.

How you can help: Spread the word about your meaningful volunteer work at FIRN! Help us find more great interns like Shayna!

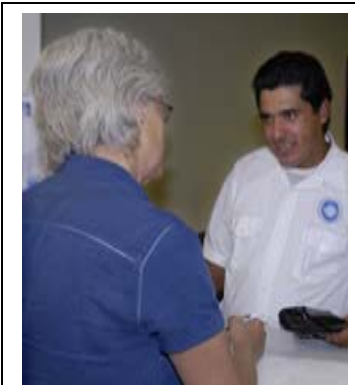


Shayna Wise pictured with Catherine Chen
Hester, Manager Club LEAP and Special

FIRN IMMIGRATION COUNSELORS IMPACT LIVES

FIRN is an experienced, respected BIA (Board of Immigration Appeals)-accredited provider of immigration counseling services at modest fees for those with limited resources. Below are examples of how FIRN's immigration counseling services impact the foreign born in our community:

"N", a refugee from Iran, came to the U.S. in 2003. Her application for Adjustment of Status as Permanent Resident was denied for lack of initial evidence submission. She then came to FIRN for assistance, and we filed a new application in December 2008 which was granted in record time in March 2009. She immediately returned to FIRN to file her naturalization application and to deliver the following note: *"I would like to thank the firm office of the efforts, communication and friendly atmosphere giving us the best of advice and committing itself for the people who are there. It's been excellent service and we really appreciate for all they did for me."* She became a U.S. citizen in July 2009!



FIRN client receives
Intake Assessment

"X", a 15-year old girl from Costa Rica, was raped while she, her sister and parents were in the U.S. legally on visitors' visas. Her parents called the police and the perpetrator was caught but fled after being released on bail. FIRN began work on her U Visa case in November 2007, obtained the required certification from the States Attorney's office that she and her parents were cooperating with the investigation, and filed the case with the USCIS in June 2008. In July 2009, the case was approved, giving the girl and her immediate family a path to obtaining Permanent Legal Residency. The U Visa allows them to work and travel for 4 years; at the end of the 3rd year, they can apply for their "green card". Meanwhile, X is enrolled in school and is benefiting from counseling.

"M", a lawful Permanent Resident Refugee from Sierra Leone, had applied for U.S. Citizenship in 2006 and had passed the civics portion of the citizenship exam. However, his Naturalization Application had been pending for more than two years and his personal inquiries into his status had been unfruitful. In desperation, he turned to a FIRN BIA-accredited Representative who sent a letter to the USCIS District Office in Baltimore on M's behalf. Within days, M was notified that his naturalization interview would occur within three weeks.

A Letter of Thanks from FIRN's French Translator

[Note: State funding cuts have resulted in the cuts of a beloved French translator on loan to FIRN from Family & Children's Services of Central Maryland. Paul Biko's services will still be available, however, on an hourly basis. Following are Mr. Biko's remarks from his farewell party.]

I'm feeling intense gladness and lively emotion for the sympathy you show at this moment I am departing from you. This sympathy proves in one hand that I was appreciated by everyone of you; in the other hand that you're morally educated in caring for unfortunate people. Thank you so much for this demonstration.

While leaving, I have the good memories toward this staff. You've treated me as your biologic fathers; you've helped me in every complaint I had; you were kind to me. I am grateful for that.

Keep on being compassionate and helpful. God bless you all!

Paul Biko

FIRN WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBERS AND ELECTS OFFICERS

FIRN's Board of Directors bid a fond and appreciative farewell to fellow members Chel Cavallon, Fernando Devia and George Doetsch; welcomed four new members; and elected new officers for FY10. The following new Board members bring considerable expertise, energy and commitment to FIRN's Board:

- **Rachelina Bonacci**, Executive Director of the Howard County Tourism Council, contributes expertise in communications, public relations, event management and marketing to FIRN's Board, building upon her award-winning professional experience in Howard County and with national corporations and associations.
- **Laurel Conran**, an ESOL Team Leader in the Howard County Public School System, brings to FIRN's Board considerable experience in designing and implementing outreach programs for foreign-born students and their families.
- **Farida Guzdar** has worked in Howard Community College's executive offices for over 20 years and has vast professional and volunteer experience with foreign-born populations and issues.
- **Vania Iscandari**, a senior at Oakland Mills High School and a member of Youth on Board, brings a youth perspective to FIRN's Board.

At its Annual Meeting in June, FIRN elected the following officers for FY10:

- President: **Nestor Benavides** (EMG Corporation)
- Vice President: **Young-chan Han** (Maryland Department of Education)
- Treasurer: **Diane McCloskey, CPA** (Allen & Shariff Corporation)
- Secretary: **Verena Meiser** (Davis, Agnor, Rapaport & Skalny, LLC)

How you can help: [Volunteer to become a FIRN Board Member!](#)

Save the Date!!

You and your friends and associates are invited to the

FIRN International Gala

COLUMBIA SPEAR CENTER

at General Growth Properties

Date: Saturday, November 7, 2009

Venue: Spear Center; Columbia, Maryland

Time: 6 p.m.-10 p.m.

TICKET PRICES:

\$60 - Single tickets

\$100 - Two or more tickets

\$75 – At the door

\$500 – Table of ten

\$50 – Sponsor a client

For questions about the event please contact

FIRN at

410-992-1923

or

visit our website at

<http://www.firnonline.org/>

PAT HATCH AWARD NOMINATIONS

HELP us to identify nominees for FIRN's Pat Hatch Award. Named after FIRN's founder, the award recognizes and honors a neighbor in our community who not only demonstrates a keen awareness and interest in "Bridging Cultures and Building Community", but also has made a significant difference in the lives of the foreign born and in our community through their volunteer and leadership efforts. The Pat Hatch Award will be presented at FIRN's International Gala on Saturday, November 7, 2009.

The Pat Hatch Award nomination form is attached (responses may be continued on a separate page if you need additional space). You may copy the form to nominate more than one person, or to share it with friends and colleagues who would also like to make a nomination. Please note that nominations are due to FIRN by **September 14, 2009**. ([Click here for the nomination form](#))

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We envision a community in which foreign-born individuals are welcomed and successful, and contribute to a global perspective, vibrant economy, and rich fabric of cultures and customs. Our mission is to help ensure equal access to community and opportunities for all foreign-born individuals.

Board of Directors

- Nestor Benavides, President
EMG Group
- Young-Chan Han, Vice President
MD Department of Education
- Verena Meiser, J.D., Secretary
Davis, Agnor, Rapaport, & Skalny, LLC
- Diane M. McCloskey, Treasurer
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- Rachelina Bonacci
Howard County Tourism Group
- Jill Marie Bussey
Hemagen
- Laurel Conran
Howard County Public School System
- Farida P. Guzdar
Howard Community College
- Vania Iscandari
Student
- Margaret Kim
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- Kelli J. Shimabukuro
Howard County Library
- George H. Taylor III
PNC Bank
- Dr. Raju K. Varghese
University of Maryland Baltimore

Executive Director
 Jennifer L. Blake

DONATION INFORMATION

Private sector donations from corporations, foundations, community-based organizations, local businesses, individuals and others are critical to sustaining FIRN's capacity to bridge the language and cultural gaps of a growing foreign-born population. Generous contributions enable FIRN to provide a growing array of high-quality services that acclimate and strengthen our foreign-born neighbors and build the capacity of local agencies, businesses, and organizations that serve and employ them. FIRN counts on your support to help prepare our foreign-born neighbors to be strong workers, high-achieving students and effective leaders - strengthening our community for all. So, please, give as generously as you can for a stronger Howard County!

FIRN is a registered 501(c)(3) organization. Our tax number is 52-1397480.

Credit Card Donations: Donations may be made online using PayPal through the FIRN website at www.firnonline.org and through [Network for Good](#). Use may also donate by credit card by calling FIRN at 410-992-1923

Donate By Mail: To donate by mail, please make check payable to: FIRN, Inc. **Mail to:** FIRN, Inc. 5999 Harpers Farm Rd, Suite E-200 Columbia, MD 21044

Supporters: FIRN is grateful to be part of a community that has long valued diversity and supported the foreign-born. Longstanding supporters have included Howard County Government (Community Service Partnerships Program and CDBG Program), The Horizon Foundation, The Columbia Foundation and The Rouse Company Foundation.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- 8/13 Quit Smoking in Spanish. Door Prizes!! 10:00-Noon at FIRN
- 8/21 Back to School Giveaway. First 50 participants will get a free backpack 10:00-Noon at FIRN
- 9/9 Club LEAP New Tutor Training 6:30-8:30pm at FIRN
- 9/15 Adult LEAP New Tutor Orientation 6:00-8:00pm at FIRN
- 9/16 FIRN Coalition Meeting 6:00-7:30pm at FIRN
- 9/30 Adult LEAP Starts
- 10/6 Citizenship Classes Begin (Classes will be held through 11/6) Call FIRN (410)992-1923 to register
- 11/7 FIRN International Gala 6:00-10:00pm at The Spear Center

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Tutors are needed for Club LEAP after-school program. The time commitment is twice a week for 1 to 1.5 hours, directly after school. Training is provided. A criminal background check is required for this position for all tutors who are age 18 and older.

Tutors are needed for the Adult English Tutoring Academy for the Fall '07 Session. Volunteers are needed to tutor Adult English learners one-on-one or in small groups on Tuesday nights or Saturday afternoons for 1 ½ hours per week for 12 weeks.

Join a FIRN Committee
FIRN Coalition: Foreign-born volunteers are needed for health and human services and outreach committees. Time commitments will vary by the month.

Youth Coalition: Howard County high school students meet at FIRN once a month to discuss issues that impact them from a cultural perspective and to plan and perform community service projects.

International Gala Planning/Event Committee
 Are you interested in PR, promotions or marketing? Special events planning or entertainment management? Treasure hunting, antiquing or appraising? Organizing, recruiting and managing? Interested? We are looking for a few good folks to work on our Gala committees.