



Building Bridges Building Bridges

VOLUME 2

ISSUE 1

JULY 2008

FIRN, Inc. 5999 Harpers Farm Road; Suite 200-E

Columbia, Maryland 21044

(410) 992-1923

Executive Director's Message

Inside This Issue

- 1 *Executive Director's Message*
- 1 *FIRN Partners Assist Refugees*
- 2 *ASA Award Dinner*
- 2 *New Board Members*
- 3 *Removing Obstacles for Citizens*
- 3 *International Gala*
- 4 *Upcoming Events*
- 4 *FIRN Fundraiser*
- 5 *Networking*
- 5 *Volunteer Opportunities*

Welcome to those of you who may be receiving FIRN's quarterly e-newsletter, "Building Bridges", for the first time. Every issue builds upon FIRN's theme of "bridging cultures and building community" to highlight FIRN news, including upcoming events and client success stories. Having just completed FIRN's FY 2008, I am thrilled to report that FIRN surpassed all expectations by handling 4,779 information and referral requests; providing immigration, social service and employment counseling to 2,149 clients; helping 94 adults and 69 children to improve their English; and fulfilling 98% of requests for skilled medical interpreters. Board members and other volunteers devoted 7,011 hours of service, valued at \$136,785. The annual American Success Awards dinner on May 7 marked an opportunity to honor outstanding foreign-born business/community leaders and appreciate FIRN's many corporate sponsors.

FIRN begins FY 2009 with key grant support for which we are very thankful! Since our last newsletter, the Howard County government (Department of Citizen Services, Department of Housing and Community Development, and Local Children's Board) has re-committed major funds for FIRN's general operations, our participation in the N. Laurel/Savage Multi-Service Center, our employment counseling program with Pinnacle Career Resources, and Club LEAP. The Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene increased 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 and the Rotary Club of Columbia-Patuxent will help FIRN reach the next level of excellence, and the Women's Giving Circle is again providing emergency grant funds for foreign-born women and children.

With the foreign born at 16% of Howard County's population and growing, FIRN's challenge is to engage every member of the community in our work. So please help recruit volunteers, inspire donations, refer clients to us, and attract new community partners for FIRN. Share this newsletter and urge others to visit FIRN's website at www.firnonline.org. I hope you'll agree: FIRN's work is the work of us all!

FIRN Partners Assist Refugees in Resettlement

It is amazing what can happen when we work together to assist a neighbor in a critical time of need. For instance, last September, approximately 100 Burmese refugees were re-settled into the Savage/Jessup/Laurel area after fleeing Myanmar because of violence and oppression. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Baltimore and local Howard County agencies, faith-based organizations, the public school system, FIRN, and other community partners sprang into action to assist these refugee families acclimate to their new homes. Our state and local network of humanitarian relief workers, healthcare providers, educators, community leaders and volunteers all worked together to provide these families with access to food, shelter, clothing, transportation, language assistance, job training, and sanctuary.

Through the efforts of many, this network, which includes Grace Community Church, Countryside Fellowship Church, the N. Laurel Multi-Service Center, Howard County Public School System, advocates at IRC, and FIRN, planned a series of outreach events to coordinate the delivery of various essential services to the families.

Thanks to all the community partners and FIRN volunteers our new Burmese neighbors appear to have settled smoothly into our communities. Recently, Howard County Public School System reported that test scores indicate that the 22 Burmese students enrolled at Bollman Bridge Elementary School (BBES) have made remarkable progress in English and Math. A handful of middle and high school Burmese students have also assimilated well into Howard County schools.

This summer BBES, in partnership with FIRN, and the Baltimore City Community College's Youth Refugee Project are conducting a 4-week session to enable these students to continue the progress made during the school year. FIRN is currently recruiting additional tutors and cultural mentors to assist these students in the fall. We are proud to have been a part of this collaborative effort to welcome these refugees into Howard County.



Annual American Success Award Dinner

Honored at FIRN's Annual American Success Award Dinner in May were: Saba S. Sheikh, MD (ASA Awardee), Francis and Joyce Afoakwa (ASA Awardees), Tatiana Pham and Malika Nekoo (Chamber of Commerce's Emerging Success Awardees), and Peter S. Lee (ASA Awardees). The following FIRN corporate sponsors were also gratefully acknowledged: Ascend One Corporation; Bruno Family Fund; Leeway Development Group; PSI Pax, Inc.; Allen & Shariff Corporation; PNC Bank; Star Hotels; Angel Dental Care; CenGen, Inc.; Davis, Agnor, Rapaport & Skalny, LLC; Gordon, Feinblatt, Rothman, Hofferberger & Hollander, LLC; Howard Community College; and Pinnacle Career Resources

FIRN Welcomes New Board Members

At its Annual Meeting in June, FIRN bid a fond farewell to two longstanding members of its Board of Directors and welcomed three new board members.

- Randy Bengfort, a marketing expert at Howard Community College, has been a key member of FIRN's Board of Directors since 2002. His leadership and expertise brought FIRN's annual report, special events materials, press releases and ASA slide shows to new heights of excellence, which we will always treasure!
- Brian Oliner, a FIRN Board Member since 2006 and Secretary of the Board, resigned to pursue professional interests. Brian's Board minutes, legal expertise, and leadership with respect to Board recruitment made him an invaluable member of the Board's Executive Committee, for which we will always be grateful.

FIRN welcomes the following new Board members who bring considerable expertise, energy and commitment to FIRN's Board:

- Verena Meiser, an Associate Attorney at Davis, Agnor, Rapaport & Skalny, LLC is the new Secretary of FIRN's Board of Directors. Her legal expertise includes advising nonprofits on tax matters. Fluent in German and Spanish, Verena also speaks French and possesses some Turkish, Russian and Arabic language skills. In addition to a law degree from the University of Tennessee, she holds masters degrees in mathematics and computer science.
- Raju Varghese, an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, previously served for many years on the Advisory Board of the Maryland Office for New Americans (MONA). Dr. Varghese's expertise in the field of social work ranges from organizational change to approaches to aging.
- Jill Marie Bussey, an Associate at Baker & McKenzie LLP, earned her law degree *cum laude* from the University of Baltimore and has over 8 years of experience in immigration law. She brings to FIRN a business law background, experience developing and assisting community-based organizations in Baltimore, and years of experience as an immigration practitioner serving nonprofit/NGO clients.

Removing Obstacles for Citizenship

The format for the Naturalization (Citizenship) Test will change on October 1, 2008. If you or someone you know is eligible and interested in becoming a United States Citizen, it may be in your interest to file before October 1, 2008. For information about filing for US Citizenship and for information about FIRN's Citizenship Test Preparation Classes call our office at (410) 992-1923.

FIRN has assisted hundreds of residents fulfill their vision of becoming United States citizens. A great example is the Menlo family:

Fleeing the turmoil in Bosnia in the 1990s, the Menlo family arrived to the United States in March of 1999 as refugees. Sam, his wife and two daughters were resettled through FIRN's refugee resettlement program, and by that summer, both girls were A and B students in a local high school.

Sam applied for his work permit and was hired by a local company as a master carpenter. While there, he was sent to a computer-aided design class in another state, and then promoted to supervisor. His wife, Mary, found full-time employment, and she too was soon promoted.

Embracing their new life, the Menlos decided to become Naturalized Citizens of the United States. But several bureaucratic blunders challenged their attempts. First, when applying for their Permanent Resident status the medical office that completed their Vaccination Supplement form signed them improperly and failed to seal the envelope. After the family finally was able to procure the forms with proper signature and seal, the Immigration and Naturalization Service office denied two of the applications and lost two of the forms.

Thus, they sought the assistance of FIRN's immigration counseling staff. FIRN sent copies of the forms and prepared an appeal, which reopened the cases and led to the whole family receiving permanent resident status.

FIRN has maintained a long-standing involvement with the Menlos, eventually assisting them to realize their dream of obtaining US Citizenship. Focused also on the desire to own their own business, the Menlos have worked hard to accomplish this dream also. They are recognized as hardworking, integral members of the Howard County community.

Businesses and Organizations Participate in The International Gala

This year, FIRN is happy to announce the revival of a tradition abandoned several years ago—an international feast/festival where the entire Howard County community can share our cultures, customs and great ethnic food and entertainment. This year the event will be called: *The FIRN International Gala - Around the World by the Lake*. It will be held on October 30th from 6pm-9pm at the Sheraton Columbia Hotel overlooking Lake Kittamaqundi.

International restaurants from Howard County and beyond will serve hors d'oeuvres and appetizers to our guests, reminding some of home and introducing others to the wonderful exotic flavors of different lands. Participating restaurants will be given the unique opportunity to showcase their restaurant's cuisine to an audience with a discerning interest in international flavors and dining with a cultural flair.

For this event to be a success we must rely heavily on the generosity of the community at large. We seek in kind donations for food, printing, entertainment, decorations, and services such as sound, video, photography, marketing, design, and public relations. Also needed are donations for the gala's silent auction and raffle.

Businesses and organizations are invited to showcase their cultural and ethnic uniqueness. Cultural organizations and groups are being asked to become part of the planning and programming for this event. Your participation will make a tremendous contribution to the rich diversity and tradition of our multi-cultural community here in Howard County. Your involvement in this event will bring your business or organization valuable exposure in the central Maryland community.

Please consider that your donation will be in the spirit of furthering our vision of living in a community in which foreign born individuals are welcomed and successful. Your donation will contribute to the development of a global perspective, a more vibrant economy, and a rich fabric of diverse cultures and customs.

We need you! Please call Paula Blackwell today at (410) 992-1923 ext. 14 to work on a planning committee or to provide a donation of goods, services or time.

FIRN Fundraisers

Wear Your WELCOME on Your Sleeve

The popular FIRN Welcome t-shirts are available in limited supply. Get yours soon before they sell out. T-Shirts will be available at the Columbia International Festival on July 26th and at the Howard County Fair on August 3rd. You may also purchase your t-shirt at the FIRN office. Cost: adults \$20; children \$15.

MACY's "Shop for a Cause" Gift Card Passes for Sale at FIRN

Macy's "Shop for a Cause" Gift Card Passes go on sale at FIRN and at FIRN sponsored events starting July 26th. For just \$5 purchasers can enjoy a full day of shopping at Macy's on September 20th with great discounts, entertainment and special events. Gift Card holders will even have a chance to win prizes including a \$500 gift card.

A portion of the cost of these items may be tax deductible. Please consult you tax professional for information.

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.

MCC Code: 5937

CFC Code: 88608

Credit Card Donations: Donations may be made online through [Network for Good](#) or by calling FIRN at 410-992-1923.

Upcoming Events

Mark Your Calendar

- July 26 Columbia International Day
Lakefront Town Center. Stop by the FIRN booth to purchase the new "WELCOME" t-shirt, featuring the tag phrase, "Around the World by the Lake".
- August 3 Howard County Fair
Howard County Fairground. Stop by the FIRN booth to purchase the new "WELCOME" t-shirt, featuring the tag phrase, "Around the World by the Lake".
- August 14 FIRN/United Healthcare Insurance Workshop
2pm-4pm
Workshop will be held at FIRN. Call FIRN to pre-register. FREE
- September 16 Adult LEAP New Tutor Training
6:30pm-7:30pm.
Meeting will be held at FIRN
- September 17 FIRN Health and Human Services Coalition Meeting
6pm-7:30pm.
Meeting will be held at FIRN.
- September 18 Citizenship Information Night
7pm-8:30pm.
Eligibility determine will be conducted. Call FIRN to pre-register.
- September 23 Club LEAP New Tutor Training
6pm-8pm.
Training will be held at FIRN
- October 30 FIRN International Gala: Around the World by the Lake
6pm-9pm
Will be held Sheraton Columbia Hotel. Call FIRN for more information. Cost \$70.

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.

FIRN, Inc
5999 Harpers Farm Road
Suite E-200
Columbia, MD. 21044
Phone (410) 992-1923

Fax (410) 730-0113
Email info@firnonline.org
Website www.firnonline.org

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 Corporation

Zack H. Shariff, Vice President
Allen & Shariff Corporation

Verena Meiser, J.D.
Secretary
Davis, Agnor, Rapaport, &
Skalny, LLC

Michel (Chel) Cavallon,
Treasurer
Consultant

Jill Marie Bussey
Baker & McKenzie LLP

Fernando J. Devia
Hemagen

George L. Doetsch, Jr.
Apple Ford

Young-chan Han
Maryland Department of
Education

Margaret Kim
AllCare of Maryland, LLC

Dr. Raju K. Varghese
University of Maryland
Baltimore

Executive Director
Jennifer L. Blake
jblake@firnonline.org

Job Opportunity

Network!!! Impact business development and access to citizen success!

- Refine your Public Relations skills
- Broker pilot partnerships
- Network with business leaders in Howard County
- Develop skills in program management, event planning, marketing and promotion

Part-time flexible hours. Earn a stipend and an education award while creating a new program to engage the business community in working with FIRN to help Howard County's foreign born population.

FIRN's mission is to support immigrants and refugees as they become productive, self-sufficient citizens of our community.

This Volunteer Maryland Coordinator position at FIRN is made possible in part by the Americorps Program of the Governor's Office of the State of Maryland.

For more information contact Paula Blackwell at (410) 992-1923 ext. 14 or pblackwell@firnonline.org

Volunteer Opportunities

Spread the Word...

Tutors for Club LEAP after-school program

Club LEAP is seeking lead and assistant volunteer tutors for the 2008-2009 academic year. We will be in 12 Howard County Public Schools. Training will be provided on September 23rd. A criminal background check is required for this position for all tutors who are age 18 and older.

Site-Supervisors for Adult English Tutoring Academy on Tuesday nights or Saturday afternoons

Seeking to gain experience or enhance your skills in program management and supervision? Dedicated volunteers are needed to set-up, register and monitor students and tutors at English tutoring sessions on Tuesday nights or Saturday afternoons.

Time commitment: 2 hours per week plus periodic leadership meetings for a minimum of 4 months. ESOL experience is helpful.

Tutors for the Adult English Tutoring Academy

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 a 12-week session.

FIRN Ambassadors

Serve for an hour or two a month assisting FIRN staff provide information about our services at health fairs, community events, and cultural activities.

Save the Date

FIRN INTERNATIONAL GALA

....Around the World by the Lake...

**At the
Sheraton Columbia Hotel
October 30, 2008
6pm - 9pm
\$70**

Join a FIRN Committee

Foreign born volunteers are needed for health and human services advocacy, education, and outreach committees. Time commitments will vary but average about 3 hours per month.

Or how about the Gala Committee

Are you interested in PR, promotions or marketing? Special events planning, graphic design 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 Cabaret committees.