



Building Bridges Building Bridges

OCTOBER 2009

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

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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. In this issue, get the latest FIRN Board news; read about FIRN's upcoming International Gala (Saturday evening, November 7) and this year's Pat Hatch Award recipient; and learn about FIRN's new English class partnership with Alianza, as well as FIRN's leadership and participation in the statewide New Americans Citizenship Project.

As we approach the holiday season, I want to express my deep gratitude for our hundreds of volunteers and donors who give so generously to FIRN. Please tell your friends, family, colleagues and neighbors why you support FIRN, and urge them to join the FIRN family! Ask your employer to match your contributions and reward your volunteerism! Share this newsletter and invite special people

in your lives to celebrate with you at the FIRN International Gala!

We need you more than ever!!

Jennifer L. Blake
Executive Director





You and your friends and colleagues are warmly invited to FIRN's signature event **The FIRN International Gala Saturday, November 7, 2009, 6:00 pm-10:00 pm** at the Columbia Spear Center, located in the General Growth Properties building, at 10275 Little Patuxent Parkway, Columbia, 21044.

More than 400 guests will attend the Gala and enjoy international appetizers and desserts donated and served by Zapata's, Red Parrot Asian Café, Akbar, Azul 17, Nichi Bei Kai, El Nayar, La Boulangerie Bakery, Copeland's, Simmies, Putting on the Ritz, Kitchen Near You, El Azteca, and other area restaurants. There will be multi-cultural entertainment and dancing, as well as a silent auction with treasures from around the globe. Guests are encouraged to wear ethnic attire from their heritage or travels. To date, at least two Ambassadors are planning to attend – can you guess who?

FIRN will honor **Dr. Murray Simon** with the 2009 Pat Hatch Award during the Gala. Following a distinguished career to improve education in 12 countries

throughout Central and South America, Africa, and Asia, Dr. Simon founded Conexiones, a nonprofit advocate for Hispanic students in our community.

Reservations can be made on FIRN's website at www.firnonline.org or by calling 410-992-1923. Your support is truly needed. Proceeds from our Gala will enable FIRN to continue providing workforce assistance, counseling, English tutoring for adults and children, and immigration legal services to our foreign-born neighbors in Howard County and Central Maryland where FIRN has helped to "bridge cultures and build communities" for 28 years. Last year, FIRN helped families from 78 countries representing 40 native languages in addition to English.

2009 PAT HATCH AWARD GOES TO MURRAY SIMON, Ph.D.

Dr. Murray Simon has been selected to receive the 2009 Pat Hatch Award at the FIRN International Gala on November 7th. Named after FIRN's founder, the annual Pat Hatch Award recognizes and honors an individual 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.

Dr. Simon is a well respected and loved volunteer and nonprofit leader in Howard County, including two years as a FIRN volunteer during founding executive director Pat Hatch's tenure, and his founding of Conexiones, which advocates for the success of Hispanic students and families. Dr. Simon earned a Masters degree in Spanish Literature and a Doctorate in Administration and Supervision from New York University. His career included 14 years in Latin America (Colombia, Dominican Republic, Bolivia, El Salvador and Guatemala) and 10 years in Africa (Botswana, Liberia and Namibia) supporting local efforts to improve education.



In 1989 when Dr. Simon moved to Howard County, he saw a growing number of Hispanic students and families who were underserved by the school system due to communication, academic, and cultural gaps. In 2000, to bridge these gaps, Dr. Simon established Conexiones as the first nonprofit organization in Howard County to focus solely on increasing achievement among Hispanic students. As founding President of Conexiones from 2000-2007, Dr. Simon developed a proactive relationship with the public school system and increased the visibility, involvement and recognition of Hispanic students and Hispanic teachers. Under Dr. Simon's leadership, Conexiones became an official partner of the Howard County Public School System in 2004. During his tenure Conexiones instituted an annual Convocation ceremony honoring and recognizing Hispanic graduates, created student clubs in middle and high schools to provide tutoring and peer tutoring, and recruited high-achieving high school Hispanic student volunteers to help students in Guilford Elementary School's after-school homework club.

Among other honors, Dr. Simon was named 2006 Educator of the Year by the Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs and received citations from members of Howard County Council and Councils from Maryland state government, including an American Community Services Award (2006 Volunteer of the Year).

NEW AMERICANS CITIZENSHIP PROJECT

The New Americans Citizenship Project of Maryland is a national prototype designed by FIRN and other members of the Maryland New Americans Partnership (MNAP) to assist eligible immigrants throughout Maryland in their quest for U.S. citizenship. FIRN is engaged in this project as a founding member of MNAP and as a host agency for an Americorps member, Nanjui Awunti. An immigrant from Cameroon, Nanjui will encourage eligible immigrants to become U.S. citizens and help FIRN to expand our citizenship support activities – with the ultimate goal of assisting at least 500 Legal Permanent Residents to become U.S. Citizens by August 2010.

This project is important for Howard County, where approx. 6,000 immigrants are currently eligible for naturalization. The benefits of U.S. citizenship are numerous and include the right to vote and access to certain government job opportunities – including many anticipated through BRAC. FIRN currently provides citizenship test preparation classes, English tutoring, immigration counseling and assistance in completing application forms, and general information about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Our participation in the New Americans Citizenship Project will enable FIRN to expand our efforts to help eligible immigrants apply for citizenship, thereby strengthening Howard County's workforce and citizenry.

FIRN AND ALIANZA PARTNER TO PROVIDE ADULT LITERACY PROGRAM

This fall FIRN and Alianza de la Comunidad are working together in a pilot project to provide ESL instruction and tutoring to 22 Spanish speaking parents of students who attend Steven's Forest Elementary School. This 10 week session will assist adult students with limited English proficiency to obtain basic English skills. It is the goal of the adult students who attend the program to improve their English so that they can be more effective in addressing their children's educational needs.

Alianza de la Comunidad is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to educating the Hispanic community to improve their living and working conditions in Howard County. This project is an example of FIRN's commitment to partner with organizations in a collaborative effort toward "bridging cultures and building community".

HEALTH CARE REFORM FOR IMMIGRANTS

The Massachusetts health care system stands out as a model for federal health care reform. In a recent policy paper, the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) notes that Massachusetts is also a leader in providing affordable health care to low-income immigrants. Among key features of the Massachusetts system are coverage for lawfully residing immigrants with no 5-year waiting period, coverage for immigrant children regardless of immigration status, and prenatal care for pregnant women regardless of status. And the state does not allow employers and private insurers to subject authorized workers to additional immigration-related verification. Massachusetts also provides outreach and enrollment incentives to reduce health disparities, including grants to community organizations to enroll hard-to-reach populations and help them

maintain coverage.

Immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, are on average younger and healthier than the general population. Thus, including them in the pool for health care coverage could lower premiums. Studies suggest programs such as the Massachusetts health care system are fiscally sound solutions. Such programs encourage the use of preventive and primary care – rather than forcing residents to rely on costly hospital emergency rooms visits.

[Note: The referenced policy paper, “Improving Immigrant Access to Affordable Health Coverage: Analysis of the Massachusetts Health Care System as a Model” (May 2009) and others related to health reform can be found on NILC’s website at www.nilc.org]

BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

FIRN’s Board of Directors bid a fond and appreciative farewell to Board member **Liz Martinez** as she headed off to college and to **Zack Shariff**, co-founder and CEO of Allen & Shariff Corporation (an engineering design and construction management firm) for his many years of service as a member and officer of FIRN’s Board.

FIRN welcomes **Alland Leandre** as a new Board member who brings considerable expertise, energy and commitment to our Board of Directors, including co-chair of FIRN’s development committee. Al is President and CEO of Vyalex Management Solutions, Inc., a management consulting firm, and a 2006 recipient of FIRN’s American Success Award. He brings to FIRN strong business acumen and leadership experience from numerous boards and commissions, including the Maryland State Board of Pharmacy, College of Southern Maryland, Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, Syracuse University School of Information Studies, and the Howard County Domestic Violence Center. Al earned a BS in Aerospace Engineering from Syracuse University and an MBA from the University of Michigan.

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 Jennifer L. Blake
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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](http://NetworkforGood.com). You 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

- 10/29 UMD Extension Presentation-Financing and Budgeting 11am-1pm at FIRN, Inc. Registration requested (410) 992-1923 . Light lunch provided. English/Spanish
- 11/4 FIRN Youth Coalition Meeting 6pm-7:30pm at FIRN. For more information call (410) 992-1923 ext 13
- 11/5 BGE Presentation-Lowering Your Utility Bill. 10am-11:30am at FIRN English/Spanish
- 11/7 FIRN International Gala 6pm-10pm Columbia Spear Center 10275 Little Patuxent Parkway For ticket information call: (410) 992-1923
- 11/12 Priority Partners- Health Presentation 10am-12noon. Door Prizes! For interpreter call Kristin at (410) 992-1923 ext 12
- 11/18 FIRN Health and Human Services Coalition 6pm-7:30pm at FIRN.
- 12/2 FIRN Youth Coalition Meeting 6pm-7:30pm at FIRN. For more information call (410) 992-1923 ext 13
- 12/10 Priority Partners presentation-Living in Cold Weather – In Spanish. 10am-12noon at FIRN. Prizes and giveaways

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

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.