



Russian community finds home away from home

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Last September, Ellicott City resident Oleg Konoplev was glad the county finally had a place where everybody correctly pronounced his name.

That place, the Russian Maryland Cultural Center in Clarksville, is where Konoplev can speak his native language, share his culture and play a good game of chess.

The center, which began offering classes and activities at Clarksville's Linden-Linthicum United Methodist Church in September, aims to provide educational opportunities for all county residents and a sense of unity for the Russian-speaking population.

"We have a critical mass of Russian-speaking community here," said Konoplev, who serves as the center's chess instructor. The center fills a void in catering to the needs of this growing population, he said.

The center offers classes in Russian language, art, music, folk dance and chess for children, as well as Russian courses for adults seeking to learn the language.

The center also holds workshops and discussions conducted in Russian as well as celebrations.

As the county's native-Russian-speaking population grows, they turn to the center for cultural, educational and social opportunities, according to founder and director Tatyana Baytler.

The 2006 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau found that 4,519 county residents claimed Russian ancestry. Another 1,021 identified themselves as Ukrainian and 1,008 said Lithuanian.

The idea for the center resulted from a picnic in August when a group of Russian-speaking immigrants discussed local alternatives to shuttling their children to Russian programs in Montgomery County and Baltimore, or hiring private tutors, Baytler said.

The church offered affordable rental space and convenient hours, she added.

So far, about 100 people participate in classes and programs at the center. Many are immigrants from Russia and other Russian-speaking countries, including Ukraine and Belarus.

"The Russians here (in the county) are dispersed. They're not unified," said Luda Bard, a Russian language teacher at the center. "People used to go to Baltimore or Rockville to get exposed to Russian culture."

The center, which is in the process of establishing nonprofit status, operates on the tuition fees paid by families, with Baytler chipping in a small amount herself.

Coffee, tea and blini

Inside the center, it's common to find parents chatting over coffee, tea and Russian blini, which are crepe-like pancakes, as they wait for their children.

Konoplev's wife, Svetlana, a Russian immigrant whose children take classes at the center, said the center provides her with a "sense of community."

"And Howard County is unique," she said. "There's a strong sense of family, community and culture."

Baytler pointed out that the center is not exclusive to Russians.

"It's not just for the Russian community," she said. "We're open to every person who comes and says, 'I want to learn.'"

Baytler said she hopes the center will become a gathering place for parents who have adopted from Russia and would like their child to maintain a sense of heritage.

Through its classes and activities, the center aims to help children feel connected to their Russian roots.

Birthday parties include traditional Russian games, and a New Year's Eve party included a visit from Ded Moroz -- or Grandfather Frost -- a Russian folk character.

In the works is a March 8 event to honor International Women's Day, a public holiday in Russia similar to the American Mother's Day.

Baytler also wants to eventually invite Russian artists, singers and writers to visit the center and expand

course offerings to subjects like math and Russian history.

More information about the center is available online at www.myrmcc.com.

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