

## Local forum explores debate over immigration (5.9.06)

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Event aims to promote understanding of issue

By Andy Behrendt, Green Bay Press-Gazette

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After integrating into American culture, Ann Lor said, she started to judge other people who still didn't fit in.

She didn't understand why Mexicans didn't seem to want to learn English, why they so often carried their flag instead of the U.S. flag and why, if they loved their country so much, they were living here. That was, until she met some of them and realized local misconceptions about her own Hmong culture.

"Until you get to know someone personally, misconceptions will happen," Lor, now a junior at the University of Wisconsin Green-Bay, told a diverse crowd of about 100 Monday night at her alma mater, Green Bay East High School, in a forum about immigration reform.

"I'm here because I want everyone--Hispanic or not--to get an opportunity like my family and I did in the United States," said Lor, whose parents fled Laos after the Vietnam War.

Understanding was a target for Monday's two-hour forum, sponsored by East High, the interfaith social justice group JOSHUA and the Multicultural Community Center of Greater Green Bay. That meant understanding the impacts of often-illegal Latino immigrants and Congress' responses: the House-approved measure that would criminalize both undocumented residents and those aiding them and a Senate committee measure that would create a path toward naturalization and citizenship.

"American people need to know about the immigrants," said Margarit Flowers, who came to Green Bay from Central America five years ago, legally, she said, after losing her business. Now working as a housekeeper and baby-sitter despite two years of college for marketing, the mother of three said she would like people here to understand what it's like to walk in Latinos' shoes.

"In my country, the people see the Americans like some special people, nice people, beautiful people," said Flores, noting she plans to return home soon. "This place is beautiful and safe."

However, not all who attended the forum were happy with it. Dan Thiry of Abrams considered it one-sided. He and his son took turns protesting outside with a sign arguing that freedom comes at a price.

"I've got nothing against them coming here to live, as long as they live by our rules, because if we go to Mexico, we have to live by theirs," Thiry said. "You pay the taxes, you pay your own housing. You will not get any free handouts. I've been here 47 years now, and I haven't gotten a free handout yet. And I've paying taxes since I've been 16."

UWGB associate professor Marcelo Cruz argued at the forum that immigrants make up a slightly larger percentage of the U.S. labor force than they do of the U.S. population. Cruz cited an estimate by which immigrants annually earn about \$240 billion, pay about \$90 billion in taxes and use about \$5 billion in public benefits.

As for learning English, a study showed 75 percent of immigrants speak English well within 10 years of arrival, even though, Cruz said from his own experience, "it's bloody hard to learn."

East High language teacher Laura Heuchert, who also went through that process, said about two-thirds of students in the Green Bay School District's English as a Second Language program are Hispanic. She noted the number of students in that program has grown from 28 in 1978 to 3,100 now.

Triella Talbott-Williams, president of NEWAAMA, a local African-American association, said she gained a better understanding about the issues at the forum.

"The legal status--I mean, it looks like what they're going to do is cost us a whole lot of money-- how can you pick up

everybody and send them back?" she said of the House measure's cost, figured at \$1.9 billion for the next five years, according to a presentation Monday. "And we're all 'immigrants,' you know."

Luis Barrueta, a 15-year Green Bay resident originally from outside Mexico City, said he understood that the immigration issues are complex for both the immigrants and the American people.

"It's just the same old story, you know," Barrueta said. "Everybody's got lots of questions and not enough answers."