

The Macomb Daily (macombdaily.com), Serving Macomb County

News

Albanians, Chaldeans, Arabs and Asians move to Macomb County

Wednesday, March 23, 2011

By Chad Selweski
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Gjeto, left, and Nick Gojcaj, brothers of Albanian descent, run four area restaurants. Nick Gojcaj, owner of the eateries, said Albanians came to the Detroit area – and Macomb County in particular – for jobs.

Nick Gojcaj speaks in broken English. His voice is flavored by a distinct accent. His surname is spelled in a way that seems to be missing a few vowels.

But his life story is all-American.

Gojcaj, 49, an Albanian, came to America for a Christmas vacation in 1985 to visit his sister. He took a good look around and decided he would never go back.

“I got a job making \$132 a week as a (restaurant) dishwasher. I used to make less than \$132 a month in Albania,” Gojcaj recalls. “I left my wife and my 6-month-old baby behind. And eight months later I brought them over here.”

Gojcaj eventually rose from dishwasher to busboy to cook to manager. Today, he owns four restaurants in the area, including Nick’s Country Oven in Shelby Township. In the past, he owned eateries in Sterling Heights and Marysville, now the lineup is Shelby Township, Clawson, Oakland Township and a diner in Cass City which he is selling.

His brother, George, helps him run the businesses and his entire family now lives in the area. And they are not alone – according to some estimates, Macomb has a larger Albanian population than any other county in America. Gojcaj said the reasons are obvious.

“People came over here to work,” he said. “And this is the best place to live – the schools, the neighborhoods, everything.”

The volumes of U.S. Census figures released on Tuesday paint a picture of a growing Macomb County -- a 6.7 percent jump in population over the past decade – and a more diverse county, with the number of blacks and Hispanics multiplying rapidly.

But behind the broad demographic category of “white” is a broad tapestry of ethnic groups in Macomb, particularly along the corridor from Mound to Dequindre. Albanians, Chaldeans and Arabs have become an unmistakable part of the Macomb landscape.

The census reported an Asian population in Macomb of more than 25,000 people – a bloc that includes Filipinos, Indians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Hmong and Koreans.

Kurt Metzger, a demographics expert, said Macomb’s new population count – 840,978 – was higher than expected and one reason is the influx of ethnic families from 2000-06. Many came to Michigan during the boom times of the 1990s and then settled

into Macomb County.

“When you talk to them ... group after group after group say they came here for the auto industry. In one way or another they started out in the auto industry,” said Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit.

One exception is that many of the Chaldeans are Iraqis who fled their homeland after the war began in 2003.

At Flynn Middle School in Sterling Heights, nearly two-thirds of the students are bilingual. The number of different languages spoken by Flynn students – the primary language spoken at home – is a staggering 26.

Principal Doug Babcock said Chaldean, Arabic and Albanian are the most common foreign languages, though the school represents an extraordinary melting pot, with kids that are Bosnian, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Assyrian, Hmong, Hindu and Korean.

Most of the 640 students are second-generation immigrants but more than 50 are enrolled in a special program that teaches English as a second language.

“We require that everyone tries to speak English. We have kids adhering to English in the spoken and the written word,” Babcock said.

Located near Metropolitan Parkway and Ryan Road, the middle school was previously overseen by principal Charles Kluka, who often said that Flynn is not a melting pot, it is a salad bowl: a place where bits and pieces of different cultures remain intact, yet mixed together.

A difficulty when dealing with such a diverse student body is that many parents are unable to help with homework or attend school functions, such as parent-teacher nights. But the school minimizes those shortcomings by deploying three interpreters who help in the classrooms all day and at special events at night.

The Warren Consolidated Schools, of which Flynn is one, also offers a “language line” with interpreters on call to talk to parents when an emergency or a disciplinary problem arises at school. But those times are rare, said Babcock, who explained that stereotypes about immigrant students are off the mark.

“We don’t have discipline problems – not any more than at any middle school,” he said. “In fact, this is the fourth middle school where I’ve served as principal and at Flynn, there are fewer discipline problems than at any school I’ve worked at in my life.”

Metzger said that many adult ethnics have settled into their niche in the Detroit area economy.

The Chaldeans have an entrepreneurial spirit, Metzger said, and tend to own or run party stores, gas stations, corner grocery stores or so-called “dollar” stores.

Those hailing from southeast Asia operate ethnic-themed grocery stores, restaurants or small businesses. Koreans, in particular, tend to own nail salons or dry cleaners.

The Indians and Pakistanis are a highly educated population that has gravitated toward information technology and health care.

And the Albanians tend to be in the restaurant business, particularly the local Coney Island eateries.

Metzger said the story of Gojcaj’s rise through the ranks of the restaurant business demonstrates a work ethic among ethnic groups that is lacking in many Americans.

“Americans won’t take those (dish washer) jobs. They wouldn’t have worked for \$132 a week,” said the former Wayne State University researcher. “The immigrant population, they take these jobs and they work for that \$132 and they still manage to save money.”

URL: <http://www.macombdaily.com/articles/2011/03/23/news/doc4d8a811eaf60b292456702.prt>

© 2011 macombdaily.com, a **Journal Register** Property