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Monday, May 17, 2010

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- chaldean palate
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- enterprise
- entertainment
- fashion
- friday blog
- from the archives
- from the bench
- guest columnists
- halhole
- in our view
- iraq today
- kids corner
- making a difference
- making the grade
- noteworthy
- obituaries
- one on one
- religion
- school highlights
- sports
- your letters
- events

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FEATURES

ARCHIVES

CLASSIFIEDS

EVENTS CALENDAR

MAY 2010						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

Happening Today

No Events

Next 7 Days

May 1, 2010

So different, so similar

Immigrant experiences lay groundwork

by Joyce Wiswell

Though Chaldeans far outnumber Jews in Metro Detroit, it's still somewhat easier to generalize about the Chaldeans.

Chaldeans trace their roots to Iraq and all are Eastern-Rite Catholics. Jews, in contrast, hail from many parts of the world and have several different religious denominations.

"When I write about Chaldeans, I always write about the three major institutions: church, family and the grocery store," said Mary Sengstock, a professor of sociology at Wayne State University and author of *Chaldean-Americans: Changing Conceptions of Ethnic Identity*. While modern-day Chaldeans have branched out into many professions, including the medical and legal fields, the independent, family-run food or liquor store is still the backbone of the community's economy.

It's not as easy to thumbnail Jews, noted Sidney Bolkosky, a professor of history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and author of *Harmony and Dissonance, Voices of Jewish Identity in Detroit 1914-1967*.

"It's a very multifaceted community — I prefer to refer to it as communities," Bolkosky said. "There is such a wide range of identities."

Data Driven Detroit director Kurt Metzger added, "It is said that you get two Jews in a room and you have three opinions."

The Jewish faith includes several denominations, including Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Many secular Jews don't consider themselves religiously observant but still embrace their Jewish culture — which tends to be politically liberal and champions social and civil rights — although it's becoming harder to categorize Jewish political leanings.

The Chaldean community typically skews more conservative on both political and social issues.

While the Chaldean population continues to grow in Metro Detroit, particularly with the influx of refugees from the Iraq War, the concentration of Jews is decreasing, "primarily the result of intermarriage," Metzger said.

Michigan's struggling economy also is a factor as Jewish young people look elsewhere for jobs. "The Jewish community has experienced a great out-migration of their youth who, after attending college, are relocating elsewhere. The community has undertaken a new effort to try to turn that around," Metzger said.

"While there has been some out-migration of Chaldeans, the community has remained strong, and young people appear to be going to college but staying in the area. Family is extremely important and often multigenerational in the same household."

The stereotypical Jew is viewed as highly educated and wealthy. A further look shows a great deal of variation within the community and a growing realization of an older and overall less-affluent community, Metzger said. "The Jewish population in Metro Detroit is considerably older than the Chaldean community, primarily due to immigration patterns and lower birth rates," he said.

Chaldeans are known primarily as small-business owners — particularly party and grocery stores — but "have expanded to own a great deal of commercial property and have seen second and third generations become increasingly professional — banking, medicine, law, engineering, etc.," Metzger added.

Though each ethnic group views itself as distinctive, Sengstock notes that all immigrants, regardless of religion and country of origin, have had similar experiences.

"One important thing I would want people to know about Chaldeans is how much they are like nearly every other group that has come to the Americas," she said.

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“People like to think their own ethnic experiences are unique and, in some ways, they are. But to a great extent, they are common to all — and that applies across the board.”

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