

# TOLEDO FREE★PRESS

## Welcome TLC aims to celebrate, build region's diversity

April 9, 2015

Written by Matt Liasse

During a recent visit to Toledo, Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit, an organization that helps immigrant families, spoke about creating economic growth by embracing immigration.

"There are lots of opportunities to connect the dots to better attract, retain and utilize the talents, resources and energy that immigrants and refugees can bring to a community like Toledo and Lucas County," Tobocman said during a March 30 presentation at Toledo's Park Inn by Radisson.

The visit marked Tobocman's second visit to the area as part of a collaboration to bring a similar initiative to Toledo.

Tobocman was invited to speak by the Lucas County Commissioners as part of the new Welcome Toledo-Lucas County (TLC) initiative, which aims to make Lucas County more welcoming to immigrants.

The initiative works with a variety of organizations to celebrate the region's migrant and immigrant heritage while supporting social and economic opportunities for all communities, including minority communities, LGBT communities, disabled communities and more.



Among those involved with the Welcome Toledo-Lucas County initiative include, from left, Welcome TLC committee member Desiree Sakho, Jesus Salas of Advocates for basic legal equality (ABLE), Americorps member Salma Barudi, Americorps member Sarah Allan, Manos Greek Restaurant owner Manos Paschalis, Lucas County Commissioners Carol Contrada, Pete Gerken and Tina Skeldon Wozniak, board of Lucas County Commissioners Executive

Assistant Brittany Ford, Adelante executive director Guisselle Mendoza, Lucas County Chief of Public Policy and Legislative Affairs Peter Ujvagi, Toledo City Councilwoman Lindsay Webb and Eugenio Mollo Jr. of ABLE. Toledo Free Press Photo Christie Materni

Tobocman, a former Michigan State Representative in Detroit's 12th district, is an expert on immigrants and their economic impact. He helped create Global Detroit and, for the past five years, has been executing strategies to improve immigrant integration within the community.

Through his work with Global Detroit, Tobocman helped launch a number of community initiatives, including ProsperUS Detroit (which helps immigrants start small businesses) and Welcoming Michigan (the 13th state/local affiliate of Welcoming America, which promotes respect between foreign- and U.S.-born citizens). Global Detroit also launched the region's first online searchable database of traditional integration services.

Global Detroit has worked with close to 20 cities across 10 states, each recognizing the necessity of making immigration more welcoming.

Welcome TLC and Global Detroit have similar mission statements, Tobocman said. "They seem to align quite nicely."

### **The initiative**

Welcome TLC is led by the Board of Lucas County Commissioners, headed by Commissioner Pete Gerken and staffed by Executive Assistant Brittany Ford, Peter Ujvagi, who is Lucas County Chief of Public Policy and Legislative Affairs, and two AmeriCorps members, Sarah Allan and Salma Barudi.

Welcome TLC has five key objectives: to "identify and support economic development and neighborhood revitalization strategies"; to "host community and neighborhood-based conversations"; to continue the service through outreach, education and collaboration; to support art; and to broaden the network of support.

Welcome TLC partners with other local organizations, including Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE), Adelante, Toledo City Council and Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC) Toledo.

"As we started working with our partners and looking at neighborhood revitalization, our concept was [to ask] what's happening out there in the United States and the world that we need to be a part of. Welcome TLC initially became a part of a very broad strategy to [create welcoming communities] in Lucas County," Gerken said.

Initiatives like Welcome TLC are being put into action across the nation. Welcome Dayton and Global Detroit work with immigrants to revitalize former Rust Belt communities.

There was a void locally, he said, a need for an initiative like Welcome TLC.

"[Welcome TLC] is such an obvious answer from our history," Gerken said. "Toledo is a city and county that was built on immigration. This is like waking up and seeing the obvious, for me.

"I wish we could say that we thought of this all on our own, but what we are doing, to our credit, is seeing an opportunity and capitalizing on it very quickly."

Gerken said the initiative is an attempt to revitalize Lucas County.

"When Lucas County was in its heyday ... is when the immigrant and refugee communities were strongest," he said. "I'll go back to the post-World War II and industrial era. Our factories and manufacturers were populated with diverse immigrant communities."

Gerken, a retired Jeep worker, said he walked into the Jeep plant in 1976 and worked with people from Lebanon, Mexico, Africa and Asia.

"With 6,000 people working there, [it] was like walking into the United Nations," Gerken said. "And they were all working together side by side to make a product that was representative of Toledo."

When people from multiple backgrounds work together, they begin to understand different cultures, Gerken said.

“Before very long, everyone knew everyone else’s cultural holidays, their food, a little bit of their language,” he said. “That’s when Toledo had strong and vibrant neighborhoods and a healthy middle class. It had diverse equality.”

Gerken said that’s changed over time.

“World trade became what it is, the middle class became what it is,” he said. “If we want to go back to where we were when we were in our heyday, let’s do the things we did then that made sense.”

Gerken said there are many opportunities to make Lucas County more welcoming today.

“Immigrants and refugees are not only coming, they’re here,” he said. “You do get the best from people when you make them feel welcome to the community.”

### **The film festival**

In January, the Ohio Theatre and Event Center screened seven foreign films as part of the Toledo International Film Festival.

The event was the first effort of the Welcome TLC initiative, which worked in collaboration with the theater and United North, a neighborhood improvement organization, to offer the films. The purpose of the festival was to expose Toledo to cultural diversity through films like “Shaolin Soccer” and “Juan of the Dead.”

Gerken said the success of the multiweekend festival pleased him.

“[It] was amazing and went beyond our expectations. You never know with the first time you do these,” Gerken said. “[It] was one action of a movement.”

United North’s Senior Manager of Community Programming Nikki Morey said the collaboration was a positive experience.

“[The collaboration] is really going to be helping, not only economic development, but also helping provide some alternatives for entertainment in Toledo that we otherwise might not get,” she said.

### **Added value**

Bringing cultural diversity to local neighborhoods is important, Gerken said.

Immigrants own 6.7 percent of Ohio businesses, even though they account for about 4 percent of the state’s population. In 2010, new immigrant businesses in Ohio generated \$1.3 billion in net business income, according to the American Immigration Council.

“Immigrants don’t take away resources from a community, they bring resources to a community,” Gerken said.

Ujvagi, who immigrated from Hungary as a child, agreed, pointing out that immigrant-owned businesses create jobs for others in the community.

“We need to make the case for people to understand it’s in their benefit as well,” he said.

“If you look at the history of Toledo and every other urban area, between immigration and migration, those are the folks that have really built this community. [Nationally,] 28 percent of all main street businesses are run by immigrants. The numbers are just overwhelming. We’re behind the curve in Toledo. We really need to build on it.”

There are also hundreds of overseas nationals who live and work in the Toledo region as employees of the more than 175 businesses in Northwest Ohio that were started or owned by people or companies outside the United States, said Paul Zito, vice president of international development with the Regional Growth Partnership. Two-thirds of the businesses are from European nations followed by Japan, Canada and others, he said.

Attraction, retention, building a welcoming community and not leaving anyone behind are the goals, Ujvagi said.

“The tragedy sometimes is people come as immigrants and then they want to close the door behind them,” he said. “We need to get people to understand how important talent attraction, talent retention and small business entrepreneurs are.”

Manos Paschalis, a Greek immigrant and owner of Manos Greek Restaurant in UpTown, said he supports Welcome TLC because he wants to help other immigrants achieve the success he’s found in Toledo. He also wants to share his story with local government officials to help them better understand the immigrant experience.

“The welcome I had, it was incredible,” Paschalis said. “They made me feel successful the first minute I stepped in the Government Center.”

“When I came here, I didn’t understand the phrase ‘The customer is king.’ We don’t have that so much in Europe. But when I first encountered government officials, with Lucas County and the city, back in the ’80s, I felt like a king. They treated me like one. I felt that, and I try to pass it along to my customers.

“I’m hoping [government] will be as welcoming to others as they were to me about 30 years ago because people from other countries that come here, they try to be successful, they create success, and success breeds success.

“The more successful people in a city, in a county that you have, you help create more success,” Paschalis said. “If you have a successful business environment, by proxy other people get successful sometimes.”

“Local governments should treat citizens as customers and kings. Because if the customer is successful, the government will be successful.”

Paschalis thinks the growth of government over the years has made it more challenging for those looking to go into business.

“Things have changed. We need to retrofit ourselves a little bit and we need to readjust a few things,” he said. “It’s not the people that changed, but the government itself has grown up through the last years. There’s so many roadblocks that make it a little more difficult for people to do business.”

Starting a life in a new country is courageous, Gerken said.

“It’s probably the most entrepreneurial and courageous act that any individual will take, by going somewhere else and taking their skills with them,” Gerken said. “They bring economics, they bring intelligence, they bring education and they bring the entrepreneurial spirit. Why wouldn’t we want more people [like that] here?”

The Welcome TLC initiative will evolve over time, Gerken said.

“Every day there’s an action that we talk about,” he said. “This is not a program that we’ll launch in September and stop the next September and measure everything in between. This is going to be a live and robust initiative ... and we have a broad range of partners.”

## **The collaborations**

In September, Welcome TLC collaborator Eugenio Mollo Jr. gave a TEDxToledo talk called “I’m Not Supposed To Be Here.” In it, he discussed his family’s immigration story and the challenges that come from beginning a new life in America.

“I’m not supposed to be here today and I bet many of you aren’t supposed to be here either,” he began. “The only reason I am here, here in this country, is because everything lined up just perfectly to allow me to be here — a hodgepodge of laws and circumstances that I had no choice or control over.”

Mollo grew up in an immigrant community in Chicago. His family would have conversations about immigration struggles around the dinner table when he was growing up. Because of that, immigration issues are part of him.

“I think it’s important for people to recognize under what circumstances either they or their family members before them were able to come to the United States,” Mollo said in an interview with Toledo Free Press. “What laws were in place that allowed them to come to this country? What circumstances out of your control allowed those individuals to come? Because I think when you learn about your own immigration story, you recognize on a personal level that we’re not in a position to pass judgment on why people are here currently, regardless of their immigration status.”

Mollo is a managing attorney at Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE), a nonprofit law firm servicing low-income individuals in 32 counties. Through its collaboration with Welcome TLC, Mollo said, he hopes to make anyone with an immigration status “feel comfortable tapping into available resources.”

Following President Barack Obama’s executive action on immigration reform, Mollo and Jesus Salas, a senior attorney at ABLE, began giving presentations on immigration executive actions.

“Even though some of the immigration actions were temporarily stopped by a district court judge in Texas, many parts of the president’s executive actions are still moving forward,” Mollo said. “We’re seeing individual successes that are a direct result of ABLE’s outreach and presentation efforts.”

Salas added that the water emergency that affected Toledo in August was a “big indicator of the gaps of the services” for immigrants because of, in part, a language barrier. ABLE helped address those issues as well.

“As the county and the city are bringing in new immigrants to repopulate the region, there is a culture shock of how we talk to this new population,” Salas said. “That’s why we’re trying to work together as a team, as a county.”

ABLE also has an office in Dayton and helped launch Welcome Dayton, another initiative Welcome TLC has collaborated with.

“A lot of lessons that are being learned in Dayton are being applied here in Toledo and Lucas County and vice versa,” Salas said. “We are learning from each other how to better make ourselves adaptable.”

Near the end of his TEDxToledo talk, Mollo spoke about the importance of people feeling at home in their community.

“People are at their happiest when they belong,” Mollo said. “They’re better employees, they’re better community members [and] they’re more likely to help other people in need. This is the way to build communities.”

### **TEDx follow-up forum**

Mollo will be the featured speaker at a TEDxToledo follow-up forum on immigration set for 9-11 a.m. April 10 at Downtown's One SeaGate (Fifth Third Bank building). Other panelists at the forum will include Ford, Shane Lakatos of Social Services for the Arab community, Guisselle Mendoza of Adelante and Joe Wells of The S.A.I. Group.

The event is free but space is limited to 75 guests. Those interested in attending should RSVP at the TEDxToledo Facebook page or at <http://bit.ly/1CdCxLf>.