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Putting the world into 'world-class city' of Lansing

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Putting the world into world-class city' of Lansing

Area residents launch international group

By DANIEL STURM

Concerned about humanitarian aid, Lansing activists have recently organized a platform for international dialogue and exchange. The new organization, called the Center for Global Culture, is raising funds to open a facility in downtown Lansing.

Martha Fujita, president of the new organization, said that they are also establishing an educational forum, called the Great Lakes World Affairs Council, for the purpose of organizing conferences and workshops. The council is seeking to be a chapter of the World Affairs Council in Washington, the nation's oldest international affairs organization. The World Affairs Council already has three chapters in Detroit, Traverse City, and Grand Rapids.

Fujita said that many remarkable organizations exist in the Lansing area, such as Michigan State University, Lansing Community College, Cooley Law School, and the United Nations Association. So far, however, there's no organization that showcases the region's global connections or empowers local people already engaged in international work. "We want to bring those organizations into our house, where they can reach average people, and not to only speak to each other on an expert level," Fujita said.

In its mission statement, the Center for Global Culture states its aim is to strengthen global connections by fostering global educational and humanitarian outreach. It also seeks to develop a more peaceful and democratic global culture.

The center plans to offer workshops and lectures, focusing on world health, environmental issues, trade and economic trends, food security and sustainable development, and to provide language tutorials in English as a second language and in second-language options for native English speakers.

The nonprofit group intends to open a gift shop with items obtained from sustainable exchange networks, which benefit artisans and independent work cooperatives in the developing world. An art gallery will feature visiting exhibits and showcase the different styles, media and sensibilities of world cultures in the visual arts. The group also plans to provide exhibition space showcasing mid-Michigan's international heritage and reflecting the settlement history of Greater Lansing.

Fujita, director of Lansing's Regional Sister City Commission, said she's been thinking about this initiative for three years. She has established a working committee to help organize the Center for Global Culture program and search for a facility in downtown Lansing. Members include secretary Miranda Perkins, who works at the MSU Museum, World Affairs Council development officer Ardena Nicholson, an international relations graduate of MSU's James Madison College, treasurer Dominic Cochran, a Lansing film producer, and vice president Honey Victoria Minkowitz, a graduate student in museum studies at Michigan State University.

Fujita said the Center for Global Culture wishes to offer office space to different organizations, such as an area group that sends medical supplies to Nicaragua or another group that is involved in development work in Ghana. Commercial organizations that do international exchange are welcome, too, she said. She recalls how a representative of Mexico's Department of Commerce inquired about possibilities to open a trade mission in Lansing during an international sister cities conference last summer.

She said they are also considering a development project in Lansing's sister city of St. Petersburg, in Russia, to help people with disabilities.

During a recent "friend raiser" luncheon hosted by the Great Lakes World Affairs, a guest speaker said that the timing for the new group couldn't be better. In a lecture, entitled "A World at Risk," Harry C. Blaney III, the president of the Washington-based Coalition for American Leadership Abroad, argued that the United States has never been more alienated from their friends, due to the invasion of Iraq, its aggressive promotion of a pre-emptive strike doctrine and its neglect of international treaties. Blaney said that the Bush administration's decision to cut funding for foreign affairs, Unicef, World Health programs and the World Environmental Organization has worsened this alienation. The budget cuts could lead to a gap of information. The Center for Global Culture/Great Lakes World Affairs Council could help to fill this gap, at least locally.

"I think the center is a wonderful idea," Blaney commented. "The debate about the world's future can start in Lansing. Here in Michigan you can also help play a role."

Lansing, which often touts itself as "world class city," could indeed benefit from the cultural contributions that are offered in the Center for Global Culture's ambitious plans. Besides hosting lectures by distinguished authors, the center plans to establish an International Human Rights Film Festival. Each year International Human Rights Day, the center intends to bring acclaimed films from around the world to downtown Lansing.

Plans include a permanent annual journalism award honoring international writers who have refused to be silenced under threat. This will be linked with a lecture series in international journalism that would bring writers to town, who have worked in global areas of need, dislocation and conflict.

The Great Lakes World Affairs Council's first official event will be a lecture on Dec. 11 by Edwin Black, author of the international best seller "IBM and the Holocaust," which documented the relationship between the corporation and the Third Reich. Black will read from his latest book, "War Against the Weak," in which he documents how 60,000 Americans were forcibly sterilized in eugenic campaigns organized by American corporate philanthropic organizations such as the Carnegie Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation: The American program was then actually transplanted to Germany, where the Rockefeller Foundation and U.S. eugenicists helped to fund and establish Nazi eugenics.

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