

ACC display celebrates immigrants who call Littleton area home



A student walks by ACC's milestones exhibit, which honors immigrants for adding culture to the community.

Photo by Matthew Jonas

By Matt Gunn

The subject of immigration often sparks debate — so much so that people often forget the value a naturalized citizen brings to the country.

But a new display in Arapahoe Community College's atrium has been installed to remind the community of the people who have chosen to call the Littleton area home. Part of the Milestones Project, ACC's exhibit, "Littleton: My International Home Sweet Home," highlights some of the immigrants who add culture and value through their community contributions.

"It's my privilege and honor to be at ACC," said Prem Menon, a campus police officer.

Menon moved to the United States from India and chose ACC's police academy. Though he had earned two undergraduate degrees in his native country, Menon's desire to continue learning and his goal of being in law enforcement drew him to the school.

"Actually, that is 100 percent true," he said. "Littleton chose us."

It's impossible to miss Menon's smile as he walks the campus. In fact, students see him each time they walk into the school. Menon is one of 14 people affiliated with ACC whose photos are part of the Milestones exhibit.

The Milestones Project, founded 10 years ago by Littleton residents Richard and Michelle Steckel, is made up of portraits and stories that explain how, despite cultural or geographical distances, there are many common threads among humankind.

Milestones projects featured either in print or in galleries and public places across the world have themes of tolerance, whether it be among children, religions or, in ACC's display, immigrants.

"It really consistently is about reducing prejudice and hatred," Richard Steckel said.

And at the college, the display helps one appreciate just how diverse the community is.

“Variety means we have 32 countries represented by students here,” Menon said.

Menon brings to the ACC police department the ability to speak six languages. It’s a level of versatility that he says makes him almost an international representative when there is trouble.

But what makes ACC and the Littleton area important to him is the sense of family he’s come to know.

“For me, home is just a place,” Menon said. “Family is more of a connection. You know people in a family.”

And beyond his role at the college, Menon is the first Indian police officer in Colorado.

Like Menon, many other immigrants featured in “Littleton: My International Home Sweet Home” have incredible stories.

Now a member of the school’s information technology department, Tia Le fled Vietnam with her family in 1995.

She found her place locally, and has worked as a technology student and employee at the college for six years.

“I love to work with my IT department,” Le said.

The grandmother of ACC employee Pascal Deseau was a translator for U.S. soldiers in World War II. After he moved to the country to be closer to her in 1988, Deseau began coursework at the college.

“So I’m trying to finish what I started years ago,” he said. “I work here full time and take classes at night. It’s really convenient, too.”

Deseau is the facility manager at the school, taking care of everything from regular building maintenance to groundskeeping and even some construction projects.

Each of the portraits at ACC, which are accompanied by small biographies, help personalize the stories of each new citizen. And they help those who walk by realize how diverse the community is.

“So what’s happened is that people have not appreciated how multicultural Littleton has become,” Richard Steckel said.

For some, the reason they chose the Denver area is simple.

“It reminds them of home,” Michelle Steckel said.

And whether it’s familiar or not, the people in those portraits soon grew comfortable.

“It’s a good community,” Deseau said.

“Littleton: My International Home Sweet Home” even seems to have its own community-building effect. The exhibit’s subjects sometimes get recognized in the most unlikely of situations.

“It’s a good thing or bad thing sometimes,” Menon admits. “The other day I had a traffic stop. She said, ‘Hi officer, I saw your picture.’ ”

But Menon couldn’t let that slice of recognition stop him from giving the woman a ticket for running a stop sign. Other than being a little more notable on the job, however, most of the response seems to be good.

“I was thrilled,” Deseau said. “I thought it was a privilege because of how many international students are here.”

The Steckels would be pleased to know the project is sparking awareness and conversation at the college just a short distance from their home and studio. The goal of the Milestones Project is to ultimately touch 100 million people across the world.

That it’s happening locally is an extra benefit.

“There are some that say, ‘Let’s respect difference,’ ” Richard Steckel said. “What we say is, ‘Let’s recognize what is the same.’ ”

The Steckels have taken thousands of portraits in many countries as part of the Milestones Project.

And each of their projects focuses on people and the many things individuals share despite outward differences.

“It’s not about photographs; it’s about feelings,” Richard Steckel said.

“Even though people like the photographs,” Michelle Steckel added.

Contact Matt Gunn at matt@evergreenco.com.

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