

Retirement center is home to many cultures

By Eun-Kyung Kim

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Yu Lui Shih had no desire to follow her daughter to Seattle several years ago. It's a beautiful city, she thought, but Shih found the independence that her then-new home provided more appealing.

She also liked the computer classes, easy transportation to shopping and church, and, perhaps most importantly, a built-in community of Chinese immigrants like herself.

Shih, 81, is part of a large group of international residents at the Gladys and Henry Crown Center for Senior Living. Chinese and Russian immigrants and refugees make up the largest portion of the global presence, each claiming about 30 of the center's 250 households. Other nationalities also are represented, including Poles, Indians and a small bloc of Bosnians.

Shih moved to Crown Center in University City about eight years ago, after taking turns living among several of her children, scattered throughout the country. When her daughter moved away five years ago, she decided against moving with her, even though it meant living in a city without any relatives.

Shih says the center, an independent living facility that provides programs and services but no personal supervision for residents, provides her with a freedom that she could not find living with her children in suburbia.

Many elderly immigrants, especially those who do not drive or speak English, find it isolating to be stuck in a house alone all day while their children work long hours.

"At home, only daughter and son. If they are not home, oh, oh. You can't do anything," Shih said. "If I don't drive, I can't go out. Can only watch television, read the newspaper. Here, we learn the computer, help each other out when we're sick. Here we feel very comfortable. At home, you are very

lonely."

Nikki Goldstein, Crown Center's executive director, said the facility became a magnet for international residents by word of mouth. The center has long been identified with the Jewish community, the major sponsors of Russian refugees who arrived in the area nearly two decades ago. But it had only several Chinese residents until 1995, when the center opened a new wing that allocated most of its units for low-income residents eligible for government rent subsidies.

That opened the door to a flood of Chinese immigrants who had heard about the center from their church friends and had waited years for a spot to open.

Today, the center's hallways are covered with pictures reflecting the different ethnicity of the residents, including many of the African-American tenants. Just as many of the fliers stapled on the bulletin boards are in Russian as in English or Chinese.

The only other center with a similar international presence is Parkview Towers, also located in University City. The facility has a number of Chinese, Russian and Bosnian residents, according to its on-site manager. The facility's management company refused to discuss any specifics.

Goldstein said language has been an ongoing challenge at Crown Center. The facility has two part-time social workers - one who speaks Chinese, the other Russian - who translate materials and answer tenants' questions. To help residents deal with common household problems, the center keeps large binders filled with pages of drawings depicting such things as leaky faucets, jammed keyholes and overflowing toilets. Each drawing has a simple description beneath it translated into various languages.

A second family

At a recent gathering of several Russian residents, Rema Korschunov said she and her neighbors were the subject of jealousy among their friends who envy the friendliness of the facility's staff and the center's programs and services, such as transportation to supermarkets, drug stores and

ethnic grocery shops.

She said her neighbors had become a second family, often looking in or cooking meals for each other when they get sick.

Lina Melamed said she appreciated the mixture of cultures.

"People have conversations in their own country language, and when we meet (others) in the hall or outside, only conversations in English. It's very good practice for all of us - Russians, Chinese, Bosnians, Americans," she said.

Arlene Citerman, the program director at Crown, said other agencies that work with the elderly are becoming more aware of the changing client base and have been adapting by adding bilingual employees.

Irina Bursak is the administrator for AW Health Care, a home care agency with workers who speak Farsi, Vietnamese, Russian and several other languages. She said cultural deference was becoming increasingly important to her clients.

"Often, they won't accept somebody if it's not from the same culture," she said.

Anna Crosslin, president of the International Institute, which helps resettle refugees and immigrants, says she can't imagine the St. Louis area soon requiring centers that specifically cater to elderly immigrants. The region simply lacks the population for it, unlike places such as Seattle or New York City.

"There's also such a diversity among ethnic populations that putting them all together in one center is just like putting them in with a bunch of Americans," she said. "So yes, it would be very beneficial in some ways, but there would be all kinds of barriers, the biggest one being ... that with most of the population, we do not have the density of similar languages to operate such a place."

Citerman said even though staff members joke about the three New Year celebrations the Crown facility commemorates - Chinese New Year, Rosh

Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and the calendar
New Year - the center is "so much closer
to what the world is becoming."

Reporter Eun-Kyung Kim
E-mail: ekim@post-dispatch.com
Phone: 314-340-8116