CULTURAL EXCHANGE CREATES COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING
Federation of Families of West Palm Beach County, Inc.

The Community and the Challenge

Florida’s West Palm Beach is experiencing a significant shift in demographics from a county that was historically White to one that is increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. An influx of Cubans, Jamaicans, East Indians, Haitians, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans are among the population groups, who had resided in the Miami metropolitan area, now call this community home. The Federation of Families of West Palm Beach County saw the need to respond to these demographic changes and to create an environment of cultural understanding among its families, youth and children as well as service providers. (For information on the national Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, see http://www.ffcmh.org/.)
The Strategy: The Cultural Exchange

Kanu Sheth decided to organize a local Cultural Exchange Program, similar in concept to the one implemented by International Rotary Club in which two countries exchange young people to live with families in the host country. The goal is to learn the traditions, religious or spiritual views, food customs and other characteristics of each other’s countries for better understanding.

Sheth recalls his own experience as a host for an international student through a Rotary Club international exchange program as a fun and rewarding learning experience for both students and the host families. “The [students] become like part of the family,” he says. “This is a powerful way for someone to learn about a person’s culture, customs and religion,” he emphasizes. “And, since we had also seen American students returning with a greater knowledge and appreciation of other cultures, we thought it was a tremendous idea to explore here at the Federation.”

The Federation of Families proposed the idea to its cultural competence committee, with the initial intent to have family members literally exchange living environments such as having a young person from a Cuban family live with a Haitian family. However, concerns about issues such as liability and safety led the group to table this approach. Federation members then decided that the cultural exchange format be a public forum, open not only to providers and families, but also to the general public. Members felt it would be a compelling way for individuals to discuss and share cultural experiences and perspectives.

Kanu Sheth chairs the Committee on Cultural Competence under the systems of care initiative Family HOPE (see descriptions of systems of care grant communities at http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/childrenscampaign/grantcomm.asp) and is Finance and Resource Development Manager for the Federation of Families of West Palm Beach. Systems of care grant communities at http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/childrenscampaign/grantcomm.asp and is Finance and Resource Development Manager for the Federation of Families of West Palm Beach.
The Action:

After much review about the forum format, the group decided on a series of evening public discussions on diverse topics, to be held once every two months at the West Palm Beach Public Library for 1 ½ hours. The Federation of Families held its first community cultural exchange on January 21, 2004, with the theme of Celebration of Holidays. The Federation of Families distributed fliers in the community and throughout mental health provider sites, inviting participants to bring a dish from their own ethnic background and offering onsite childcare at no expense to participants.

This first forum drew a diverse group of 28 people, including individuals from the African American, Cuban, Haitian, Indian, Jewish and White communities. Participants also reflected a range of ages, from teenagers to older residents. Three specialists from the Multilingual Psychotherapy Centers, Inc. in West Palm Beach - Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American mental health providers - kicked off the program with an overview of how they provide services to clients in their centers. They spoke of how the diversity of their staff—reflecting 14 different countries—was critical for understanding their clients’ customs, indigenous practices, spiritual and religious beliefs, and other factors affecting their response to mental health services. For example, the specialists talked about how some patients from other countries have firm beliefs about from whom and how mental health treatment should be provided. Another example is that some clients prefer to consult their spiritual leader first rather than a medical or mental health professional. Since some of the staff of the Multilingual Psychotherapy Centers are from the same country as the client population, they often have a greater understanding or knowledge of their clients’ beliefs, and in many instances this knowledge increases the clients’ level of comfort with treatment.

After the presentation, participants including families, providers, and members of the community, were divided into four groups and asked to draw a picture of how their culture celebrates holidays. Individuals from each group described what their pictures depicted. Providers and family members participated in this activity as peers, in contrast to a clinician-client role.

“It was an affirmative experience to learn in this way about other cultures,” Sheth notes. For example, he said, people learned that rather than Christmas, some East Indians celebrate Diwali, a five-day festival of lights observed throughout India as the beginning of New Year. “We learned that during Diwali [East Indians] go to their friends’ home to celebrate and eat meals at each other’s homes,” Sheth explained. Community participants then shared the food they brought, a cornucopia that included chicken curry, basmati rice, Cuban rice and beans, kosher food and jerk chicken, to name a few. The sharing of food allowed participants to describe their own dishes and learn how other cultures prepare common food items such as chicken and rice in different ways.

The second forum focused on Latino culture and music. A Latino couple, a Bolivian woman and an Argentinian man, performed a Latin dance, and then an encore, at the participants’ enthusiastic request. After the dances, those in attendance engaged in a discussion about the meaning of the dance and each movement.
The Action: (cont’d)

The discussion led to an exploration of socio-economic and class differences in Latin American countries, dating and marriage, cultural values about family, and the lunchtime siesta. It was quite an interactive session in which the adults, children and youth asked many questions. The third event, held in May, explored the role of women in different cultures. Female professionals from Palm Beach Community College and Florida Atlantic University spoke about women’s roles in their respective communities—African American, Italian, Puerto Rican, and Kenyan. These discussions focused on a wide range of situations, including arranged marriages, domestic violence, discrimination, and differences in hair (e.g. texture, care, and styling).

The fourth forum in July, which drew 45 participants, focused on the role of men in different cultures, especially youth. The speakers included male professionals from Palm Beach Community college, cultural educators, a Haitian chief, a community development consultant, and a drummer from a Haitian center. The gathering also included a skit on rites of passage from the book, Of Water and the Spirit, by Malidoma Patrice Some, an autobiographical account of one man’s life journey between two worlds—his West African village and the Western world.

What Works and Why:

The increase in the number of family and provider participants—from 28 to 45 in six months—shows the cultural exchange program is having a positive impact, Sheth says. “People hear about it and are curious,” he says. “We also tell families to bring their friends.” Families say they are happy to be participants in these public discussions and to have the opportunity to suggest future topics. For instance, children and youth have recommended subjects such as music and ethnic dress of different cultures. The theme for an upcoming event is food—a most delectable and enjoyable way to share cultural traditions.

The Cultural Exchange Program has provided a forum for cultural discovery in a manner that does not reinforce negative stigmas about mental illness. It is conducted in a location that is neutral (the Public Library). It is open to the public at large, not just service recipients. And with the entertainment and food, it’s fun! The forums offer an environment that is inclusive and safe to explore similarities and differences across cultures, and bridge the cultural divide that often separate people and communities.
The National Center for Cultural Competence is highlighting the Cultural Exchange Program conducted by the Federation of Families of West Palm Beach County because it exemplifies two of the essential elements in a culturally competent system of care (Cross et al) - valuing diversity and acquiring cultural knowledge; encouraging collaboration and power sharing between families and providers. The forums also foster an environment in which the power differential between families and providers was neutralized. The Cultural Exchange Program has successfully provided a structure and process to engage family members, providers and the community in an experience that has the potential of reducing stereotypes and building bridges. Safe forums to build cultural awareness and engage in interpersonal exchange offers a greater likelihood for authentic communication to take place in service delivery encounters.

For more information on the cultural competence framework, guiding principles and values, see http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc/framework.html

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About the National Center for Cultural Competence

The NCCC provides national leadership and contributes to the body of knowledge on cultural and linguistic competency within systems and organizations. Major emphasis is placed on translating evidence into policy and practice for programs and personnel concerned with health and mental health care delivery, administration, education and advocacy. The NCCC uses four major approaches to fulfill its mission including (1) web-based technical assistance, (2) knowledge development and dissemination, (3) supporting a “community of learners” and (4) collaboration and partnerships with diverse constituency groups. These approaches entail the provision of training, technical assistance, and consultation and are intended to facilitate networking, linkages and information exchange. The NCCC has particular expertise in developing instruments and conducting organizational self-assessment processes to advance cultural and linguistic competency.

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