

The Many Faces of Arlington Jamestown 2007 Oral History Project

BY NANCY HALL

When Captain John Smith sailed up the Potomac as far as Arlington, the faces he saw were those of Native Americans. If the Jamestown leader were to visit Arlington today, he would see faces of people from around the globe.

To commemorate the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, the Arlington Committee on Jamestown 2007 commissioned an oral history project, "The Many Faces of Arlington." Focusing on diversity in Arlington County, the project offers future historians a glimpse of life four hundred years after the establishment of the first permanent English settlement in North America.

From February to April the committee members interviewed 36 individuals from Armenia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Kashmir, Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, and Viet Nam as well as from the United States. The participants were active in local government, politics, business, historic preservation, religion, music, art, education, law enforcement, medicine, the military, and various civic projects. In age they ranged from 85-year-old Peggy Fisher to teen-age members of the Yorktown High School History Club.

The interviews revealed that, like Jamestown's founders, many Arlington immigrants were entrepreneurs. For example, although she didn't know how to sew before coming to this country, Korean immigrant Mi Jin Ha established Jin's Cleaners and Tailoring in the Williamsburg Shopping Center. Dany Abi-Najm and Grace Abi-Najm Shea described how their parents, Tanios and Marie Abi-Najm, left war-torn Lebanon and opened the Lebanese Taverna in Westover in 1979. All five children helped out at the restaurant, which also became a second home. Grace Shea stated:

I was four years old when they opened up the restaurant, and the elementary school was directly across the street . . . They said even from the beginning I was a business woman. I used to take business cards to school and pass them out to all the teachers and tell them to come and bring their families to my parents' restaurant, which was right across the street. . . .

One of the main things that we did, and which made our restaurant so special, was it became our home. I would always do my homework there, (and) I'd come there after school. I'd come with my friends.

Some immigrants now aid newcomers. After coming to Arlington from Bolivia in 1976, Dr. Emma Violand-Sanchez founded the first League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to advocate for Latino rights. The Abi-Najms offer legal help to their restaurant employees who are seeking green cards. Seyoum Berhe, who came to this country from Ethiopia in 1978, currently serves as Director of the Catholic Diocese of Arlington Migration and Refugee Services, which helps immigrants find jobs and housing and enroll in English classes. Reflecting on the need for such services, he stated:

When I got here [in November, 2000], there was one full-time and one part-time staff. We have over twenty staff right now. Our budget was under \$200. Right now we have over \$1.3 million budget. We had only one office. We have five sites right now. . . I have a beautiful staff. All multicultural. You can find almost every language on my staff. We have people originally from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran, Viet Nam . . . We basically have every language you can imagine, so it's the United Nations in itself and it's a pleasure.

Despite Captain John Smith's diplomatic efforts, cultural differences between the Jamestown's founders and Native Americans often led to conflict. In contrast, the Arlington residents who were interviewed welcomed the county's ethnic and cultural diversity. Former Virginia Board of Education member Margaret Marston Lampe claimed: "The variety of ideas and the variety of cultures that you meet (in Arlington) are just magical."

Yorktown student Khadija Hafiz, whose family came from Egypt when she was seven, spoke glowingly of her neighborhood:

I recommend Arlington to anyone who would love to come to a very diverse and engaging (community). . . . My neighbors right in front of me are Caucasian and my neighbors on the right of me are African-American. . . . Everyone is always outside. We have neighborhood cookouts. It's really nice. And then my neighbors on the left are Filipino. My neighbors down the road are Hispanic. It's really cool.

Many civic activists here found innovative ways to cope with the problems of poverty, disease, and disabilities. Lora Rinker helped to organize the Arlington Street People's Assistance Network (ASPAN), which provides temporary shelter, job counseling, and other services to the county's homeless. Rhonda Buckner led efforts to establish group homes for the mentally disabled. Dr. Tom Connally played a leading role in expanding the Arlington

Free Clinic, which offers medical care to immigrants and other residents who lack health insurance.

Other innovators contributed to education and culture in the county. Ray Anderson's vision of a school in which highly-motivated students could shape their own curriculum led to the establishment of H.B. Woodlawn. Peggy Fisher co-founded the multi-racial Metropolitan Chorus. An immigrant from Armenia, Ruben Vartanyan, mobilized talented musicians to develop the Arlington Symphony.

English settlers at Jamestown suffered fatal Indian attacks. Arlingtonians confronted death when American Airlines Flight 77 struck the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Even for some not directly affected, the crash was a life-changing event. Asked where he was during 9/11, the Reverend Charles Wildman, pastor of the Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ, stated:

I was right here. I was in the middle of teaching a class at church and then rushing to volunteer as a chaplain at the hospital, volunteer chaplain, and also trying to check on all of our members who worked at the Pentagon. I was having my staff make phone calls . . . to see what we could learn.

Later the church invited members and others in the neighborhood to engage in prayer and meditation, and attend special worship services and educational discussions:

One of our members was an ambassador to South Asia under Madeleine Albright, and he was the last former U.S. contact with the Taliban. He did a program for us on the Taliban. . . His wife even came in and modeled a burka. We had an overflow crowd in the sanctuary.

While the lack of adequate food and clean water plagued the settlers at Jamestown, most Arlingtonians cited a lack of affordable housing as our number one problem. Charles Rinker, who has worked on tenant rights and housing issues since the 1970s, lamented the fact that most teachers, policemen, and firefighters who serve the community cannot afford to live here. Rinker explained:

Arlington has become such an attractive community because of its location and because of the subway (that) developers are anxious and willing to pay huge dollars to get properties that they can either renovate or tear down and build high rises on. That's particularly true along the Metro corridors, but it's also true in other places along Columbia Pike.

So what happens is those people who were living there before were in what we call market affordable housing, . . . affordable not because they had any program that set them aside but because the market rent was affordable to people at 60 percent of median income. . . . Now developers can develop units that are affordable to 100 or 120 percent of area median and still get renters. So they don't have [a] real incentive to provide affordable housing.

State Senator Mary Margaret Whipple added:

We've benefited greatly, I think, in the richness of our community, with the number of immigrants who have come here, beginning primarily with the Vietnamese in the mid-seventies and then different nationalities over the years. You can almost mark the trouble spots of the world by the waves of immigration that have come to Arlington, escaping war-torn areas. It's been a very interesting phenomenon and, I think, has enriched the life here for everyone. But the problem of (affordable) housing is a difficult one.

During the interviews, the respondents in the oral history project were asked whether the settlement of Jamestown had any special significance for them. Yorktown High School senior Thomas Moire felt a personal link with the Jamestown settlers:

I have an ancestor who lived in Virginia in the early 1600s. Part of my family came over here from England, so I do feel a certain connection to the original Jamestown settlement and the beginning of the history of Virginia.

To many of those interviewed, Jamestown represented a spirit of adventure and acceptance of diversity. Others expressed concern over the treatment of Native Americans, while some cited Jamestown as a source of American democracy. Lebanese-born Dany Abi-Najm stated:

I happen to have visited Jamestown two years ago with my kids. Being there, I got this feeling of the spirit of adventure and the spirit of promise, going for something new and going to a place where it's relatively unknown. And for us as a family, we came to the United States I believe probably more or less the same way the settlers came 400 years ago. But for the settlers, there was [sic] definitely a lot more unknowns. They paved the way for us 400 years ago.

Yorktown student Elizabeth Egbert also expressed admiration for the Jamestown settlers:

I wouldn't want to come someplace that hadn't even been remotely mapped or anything. It was just like completely new territory. You don't know anything about what kind of animals or people are living there or whether they're going to kill you or not. So I guess it took entrepreneurial spirit to come here.

Rhonda Buckner, recipient of the 2006 Jim Hunter human rights award, extracted special meaning from the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe:

I guess what struck me most was that John Rolfe . . . married Pocahontas, and so from the very beginning we have a tradition of acceptance and of getting along with and caring about and loving people who are not like us. So as I have been . . . working for people with disabilities and then . . . personally as a lesbian . . . his promoting of acceptance and marrying is a wonderful link.

Seyoum Berhe, who emigrated from Ethiopia, also found meaning in the Pocahontas story. He stated:

In some cultures around the world, when tribes or ethnic communities fight, the way to solve it is by marriage. I was reading Pocahontas, the story, and I said: "Wait a minute, this is interesting culture." This happens in Africa, but it also happens in North America, so I was very interested at that peacemaking that was not quite peaceful in the beginning, but eventually it ended up having a very peaceful period.

Dr. Emma Violand-Sanchez, LULAC founder and retired ESOL supervisor in the Arlington Public Schools, compared the treatment of Native Americans in Virginia with that of indigenous people in Bolivia. "I come from a country where 70 percent of the population is native indigenous, and many times they also have not had opportunities and they have been disenfranchised, similar to many of the Native Americans," she maintained.

Lora Rinker, former executive secretary of ASPAN, cited both positive and negative aspects of the Jamestown experiment:

I think one of the lessons we learn (from the Jamestown settlement) is it took a lot of perseverance, it took courage, it took energy, it took a lot of heartache because a lot of people that

came didn't make it. . . . We also have to think about it in terms of the people who were already here and the fact that we put a settlement into a continent where there were already I'm not sure how many thousands of Native Americans, and we still haven't done right by those people. They're still on reservations, a lot of them, and they're still poor. . . . We need to do right by the people that we have displaced. I know all about displacement, I guess, both housing and other ways.

To Senator Mary Margaret Whipple, the fact that Jamestown was Virginia's first capital was personally significant:

Jamestown was the first capital and in 1619, not so long after 1607, they had the first legislative body. The House of Burgesses began meeting in Jamestown. And to see the foundation of that old capital and to know that this legislative body has met continuously for almost 400 years certainly makes me feel the history of the moment and respect the fact that the democratic institutions started so early in this country and that Virginia was responsible for that.

Just as citizens of Arlington reflected on life in Jamestown 400 years ago, perhaps future generations will view us as we lived, worked and interacted in 2007. In "The Many Faces of Arlington" they will see a community which celebrates the diverse ethnic origins and talents of its people as well as its Virginia heritage.

Nancy Hall was the project manager for the Jamestown 2007 oral history project, "The Many Faces of Arlington." A long-time resident of Arlington, Nancy was an educational writer and social studies teacher in the Fairfax County Schools. After retiring in 1996, she became a free-lance writer. Her articles have appeared on PBS online, WETA online, and in the Wall Street Journal teachers' guide. She also produces the teacher's guide for the Opera Theatre of Northern Virginia children's opera.

Author's note: Transcripts of interviews for "The Many Faces of Arlington" may be found in the Virginia Room of the Arlington Central Library.