



BUILDING

BRIDGES

Columbus Rolls Out Welcome Mat

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

It was summer 2008. Torrential rain and flooding tested the resilience of Columbus residents shortly after Rocio Rodriguez relocated to the community for a job at global power leader Cummins. But something amazing happened. Instead of the conditions dampening her spirits, Rodriguez was inspired.

“It was a huge storm that of course nobody was expecting and the rivers surrounding Columbus flooded,” she recalls. “The flood got to the houses of many, many people and even to our (Cummins’) tech center and hospital (Columbus Regional Health).

“I was impressed with how the community came together. During the flood, we needed to translate into Spanish all of the ads and warnings that were given because a lot of our Latino people are low income and don’t speak English. I participated in translating the messages and talking through them on the radio. That was kind of the very first impression I had of Columbus.”

That sense of solidarity speaks to Columbus’ reputation as a place that takes care of its own. It’s also a community that isn’t afraid to confront challenges head on. Consider the 2004 *Welcoming Community Study*, which has played a tremendous role in shaping (and reshaping) Columbus’ culture. It explored issues ranging from religious affinity and gender to age and sexual orientation.

Tracy Souza is president and CEO of the Heritage Fund (the Community Foundation of Bartholomew County), which conducted the project.

“What the study showed was that it is a friendly community, but not everyone feels welcome in the same way,” she remarks. “It was very clear that if you weren’t part of the mainstream, you felt less welcome. It was hard for the community to absorb . . .”

A variety of initiatives grew out of *Welcoming Community* and a 2011 follow-up study. Among them: Columbus Young Professionals (CYP), Columbus Area Multi-Ethnic Organization (CAMEO) and downtown revitalization.

Souza is fascinated that people are still talking about *Welcoming Community*.

“That says there’s a thirst out there – people want to feel welcome,” she muses. “They want to feel like they’re a part of their community.”

‘Extend your hands’

Cummins’ headquarters stand tall in Columbus. The company employs more than 54,000 people worldwide. It recruits global talent and cultivates a welcoming workplace culture.

“We like to provide opportunities for our employees in development,” director of human resources Rodriguez explains. “That means that many times, you need to move from one place to the other where the work is at Cummins. And a lot of the work is in Columbus, given that the corporate office is here. We need all of this talent, and making them feel at home is very important for a corporation like Cummins – not only for the people who come to work every day, but also their families.

“We’ve (Columbus) advanced a long way, but we cannot claim victory,” she contends. “There’s still some improvements to make – and that’s fine. We need to keep working to make Columbus a more welcoming community.”

Rodriguez, along with business leaders such as Ryan Hou and

Welcome to Columbus

- Proud home of 21 Japanese companies, four German, four Chinese, and one company each from France, Switzerland and Canada
- Has the highest concentration of mechanical engineers in the nation. The community boasts three times the national average for all types of engineers
- Ranked sixth in the U.S. for architectural innovation and design by the American Institute of Architects

SOURCES: Columbus Area Visitors Center, Columbus Economic Development Board



The Ethnic Expo – which features music, fireworks and more to celebrate diversity – attracts thousands each fall. Participants proudly showcase the Taj Mahal during a parade and present mouthwatering cuisine.

Tom Harmon, led the formation of CAMEO in 2009. It consists of nine ethnic associations that proudly showcase their cultures and traditions.

Hou left his native Taiwan in 1985 and made Columbus his home. In the years since, he’s enthusiastically sought to attract foreign companies (traveling overseas on many occasions), established the Columbus Chinese Language School in 2000 and co-founded LHP Software in 2001.

LHP specializes in highly-engineered solutions – specifically embedded software, engineering tools, telematics and emerging technologies. In addition to its Columbus headquarters, LHP has offices in Detroit, Chicago and China. It has 350 employees.

Hou makes a bold statement . . . and it’s one that resonates with many: Being a welcoming community is vital for survival.

“Once you extend your hand, all culture, all language, all education, all things will come,” he stresses. “When these things come, it will actually make the United States stronger. (There’s a) mutual benefit. In Columbus, all of the leaders have a vision. They know where the community is going to go. It’s a beautiful thing.

“Our company, we have a lot of diversity. Way over half of our employees are from China, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Korea – all over the place. Diversity is our strength for LHP.”

Young at heart

Annie Smith was born and raised in Columbus. Shortly after graduating from college and settling in Indianapolis, the 26-year-old began commuting back down Interstate 65 to work at Cummins.

She missed home.



A networking gathering hosted by Columbus Young Professionals helps build new connections.

“I loved living in Indy, but the longer I spent in Columbus, the more I was getting involved in the Columbus community,” she recalls. “All of a sudden, I was going to work until five and then coaching soccer and doing other community things, and I wasn’t leaving Columbus until eight o’clock at night to drive to Indy. It was really nice when I moved back here (two years ago) to live and work in the same city.”

Smith is director of education and engagement at the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce. She’s part of the team that recently relaunched the Columbus Young Professionals, which offers a social outlet for members (most are between ages 21 and 40, but all are welcome).

“We try to be a group that welcomes everyone and helps people find their place in the community, helps them live the best lives possible in Columbus and makes sure that they’re happy and that they want to stick around here,” Smith relates.

They face off at weekly Ultimate Frisbee competitions at Mill Race Park; enjoy conversation and cuisine at “3rd Thursday” gatherings, which revolve around a different theme each month; and complete physical and mental challenges during an intern edition of the television show *The Amazing Race*.

“Columbus is such a thriving community,” Smith reflects. “We have great young professionals who are excited to be community leaders. It’s a community where if you want to be a leader and be involved and make a positive impact, you completely have the ability to do that, which I think is special.”

LHP University (known as LHPU) is among those initiatives opening doors for new college graduates. The six-week, hands-on training program is designed to produce highly-qualified controls engineers and connect them with employment. Several individuals have parlayed their training into jobs at LHP and other technology businesses.

When asked what motivates him to invest in fresh talent, Hou pauses before sharing a profound conversation with former Columbus mayor Fred Armstrong.

“He one time told me, ‘Young people are 25% of our population – millennials, those guys – but they are 100% of our future.’ We need young people.”

Tom Harmon agrees.

He’s also passionate about making a difference in Columbus. He’s a past president of CAMEO (as is Rodriguez). In addition, he’s vice president at family business Harmon Construction in North Vernon, and also holds leadership roles at Columbus-based Taylor Bros.

Construction Co. and Harmon Steel.

Harmon’s voice is full of pride as he describes the African American Fund of Bartholomew County. He launched the foundation – which emphasizes education, leadership development, economic career development, health awareness, and arts and culture – with five other African American families.

“We use those funds to help promote initiatives like supporting the tutoring enrichment program here in the community that a lot of African American kids go to,” Harmon reveals. “We provide leadership development by providing scholarships for African Americans that go to leadership classes.”

He has high hopes for Engage Columbus, a three-year pilot project that kicked off in March.

“A lot of times when people move into a community, they find it hard to get plugged in,” Harmon comments. “Whatever their interest may be, they can find out who to talk to and get plugged into that.”

Souza sums up the significance of building a welcoming community.

“We want to have a community 20, 30, 50 years from now that’s still vital and has the employers and quality of life that make people want to be here and be comfortable here. That’s not something any one organization or person or company can really drive. It takes the community embracing that as a value.”



Marja Harmon, daughter of Tom Harmon, serenades jazz fans at an event celebrating Black History Month.

RESOURCES: Tom Harmon, Harmon Construction, at www.harmonconstruction.com | Ryan Hou, LHP Software, at www.lhpsoftware.com | Rocio Rodriguez, Cummins, at www.cummins.com | Annie Smith, Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce, at www.columbusareachamber.com | Tracy Souza, Heritage Fund, at www.heritagefundbc.com