

THE TENNESSEAN

September 7, 2012

Local diversity is model for all

By Sean Foley

Situated in a non-descript strip mall in Southeast Nashville, the Nippers Corner Starbucks looks like many other branches of the Seattle-based coffee shop chain.

Throughout the week, teams of young baristas serve a steady stream of customers. Legions of college students from nearby universities spend hours hunched over laptops reading, studying or writing. Many of those students are from Middle Tennessee State University, the large state university situated in Murfreesboro, the city made famous nationally because of the controversy surrounding the building of a mosque and Islamic Center there.

But on weekend nights the cafe is transformed into a mini-United Nations. In the many tables outside and inside the cafe, large groups of people of various nationalities congregate. English freely mixes with Amharic, Arabic, Farsi (Persian), Japanese, Korean, Kurdish, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Sudanese and Turkish. The Starbucks at Nippers Corner is not unique; similar populations can be found throughout Middle Tennessee, from Clarksville to Murfreesboro and from Lebanon to Spring Hill. It is Middle Tennessee's success at managing this diversity — long associated with far larger metropolitan regions in the United States — that has been ignored by the national news coverage of the events in Murfreesboro. Indeed, the region of 1.6 million people has attracted so many immigrants that it is often called a "new Ellis Island."

Although peoples from various parts of the world have long called Middle Tennessee home, the diversity we see today is a comparatively recent phenomenon, dating to the late 1970s, when overseas students attended the region's many colleges and universities and large numbers of refugees were resettled for the first time. One of the earliest populations to arrive here was the Kurds, many of whom fled violence and persecution in Iraq. Over the past 40 years, they have built a vibrant "Little Kurdistan" in Nashville and earned the city the title "the capital of Kurdish America." Tennessee State University will host the first Kurdish Arts Festival this month, while Middle Tennessee State University has offered Kurdish language and culture classes in recent years.

The Kurds' success has paved the way for others from the Middle East to settle in the 1990s and the 2000s: Egyptians, Iranians, Iraqis, Somalis, South Sudanese and Sudanese. These communities have made contributions to Gaylord Opryland and to other leading businesses in the region, set up roots, and built houses of worship. Their small businesses have revolutionized whole sections of Murfreesboro Road and Nolensville Pike in southeast Nashville, and they are integral to regional industries such as health care, manufacturing, meat packing, tourism and hospitality, transportation and warehousing. Here it is worth noting that Middle Tennessee's unemployment rate was 7.3 percent in July 2012 — well below the national average — and Williamson County's was even lower, 5.9 percent.

While many Americans associate the Arab world with Islam, one of the largest of the Arab populations in Middle Tennessee is Christian: Coptic Christians from Egypt. There are 12,000 Coptic Christians in Nashville alone and five Coptic churches in Davidson County. Another church will soon open in Rutherford County. St. Clement, a Coptic K-5 school founded in Nashville in 2001, offers classes in Arabic, Coptic, English and Spanish.

Thousands more Coptic Christians live in other communities in Tennessee and throughout the Southeast. There are also Christians among the 8,000-strong Sudanese and South Sudanese in Middle Tennessee. There are slightly fewer Somalis and Iranians in Middle Tennessee.

Workforce benefits

Significantly, communities from the Middle East are part of a wider mosaic that includes East Asians, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Kosovars, Russians, South Asians, Southeast Asians and Hispanics. (Between 2000 and 2010, the population of Hispanics in Nashville grew from 26,000 to 61,000.) The diverse Asian community includes refugees from Bhutan and Myanmar (Burma) along with executives from Nissan and other Japanese companies that have operations in Middle Tennessee. The Burmese have had a noticeable impact in Smyrna, breathing new life into an Episcopal church there. In 2012 there were celebrations for Chinese new year in Middle Tennessee, including a Lion Dance attended by Nashville's mayor, Karl Dean.

After the controversy over the mosque and the Islamic Center in Murfreesboro fades from the headlines, Middle Tennessee will remain a highly diverse community, with a multilingual and skilled workforce well-positioned to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by an interconnected global economy. For generations, only the nation's largest cities could take advantage of the unique skills and entrepreneurial spirit that these immigrants bring. But today, cities like Murfreesboro and Nashville also can benefit from immigrants.

As the nation discusses new approaches during the fall presidential campaign to reduce unemployment and to boost economic growth, it might be worth looking at how Middle Tennesseans have done right by their new neighbors and reaped considerable economic rewards.
