

MetroChicago

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Melting pot offers cultural feast New directory seeking unity through diversity

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Rheinischer Verein Inc. has celebrated Mardi Gras in Chicago for the past 106 years.

"Yes," said Josef Matuschkla, the German-American group's president, "we've heard of New Orleans. But have you heard of Dusseldorf, Koln and Mainz? Most Americans don't know that Mardi Gras is a big, big celebration in those cities."

Not only don't most Chicagoans know it's a big German event, they haven't even heard of Rheinischer Verein, which means "from the Rhineland." They also don't know that 2,000 people AND Gov. Jim Edgar packed the Chicago Hilton & Towers for this year's Mardi Gras celebration.

Matuschkla hopes a listing in the newly released Directory of Chicago Ethnic Organizations (and cable TV ads) will help attract more people to their annual party.

The directory linking German-American Mardi Gras revelers with African-American divinity scholars, Hispanic MBAs, Italian-American dentists and 397 other ethnic organizations was the work of a tiny staff operating out of a cluttered South Loop office.

The group, the Illinois Ethnic Coalition, did it in 68 pages with a grant from the Polk Bros. Foundation.

City watch Ethnic groups

"If you believe in homogenization, then you are going to be disturbed by this. But if you believe in unity in diversity, this is great," said Ed Marciniak, president of Loyola University Chicago's Institute of Urban Life.

"The directory underscores that Chicago has always been a city of neighborhoods, many of them ethnic enclaves," Marciniak said.

"Some of these ethnic groups, such as the Germans, have persisted for generations. Many of them have moved out to the suburbs, but have kept their identity," he said.

Matuschkla's group, which operates out of his Niles home, fits that profile. "In 106 years we've had our ups and downs," said Matuschkla, 51, who emigrated from Germany to Chicago in 1965 and now owns a construction company here. "The younger people are not taking the initiative. They are not like the older people who still remember Germany."

The directory also lists more recent arrivals, including the Vietnamese Association of Illinois, illustrating that the 150-year-old trend of newcomers settling here has not stopped.

The directory's practical use has not been lost on Fortune 500 companies or non-profit groups which explains why copies have been snapped up by Sara Lee and AT&T as well as every Polish organization in Chicago.

"This book puts people who have goods and services to offer in touch with a very rich and diverse ethnic population they could not have linked up with before," said Ellen Dick, director of the Chicago-based Illinois Association of Non-Profit Organizations.

After perusing a copy, Dick said the directory would change the way she does business. Now that she has a systematic way to reach ethnic non-profit groups, she will tailor new programs to serve them.

The ethnic coalition is not stopping with the directory. Later this year, it plans to publish an ethnic handbook, "A Guide to the Cultures and Traditions of Chicago's Diverse Communities." It will profile the city's most prominent ethnic groups, reporting on demographic trends, immigration patterns, traditions, holidays and political and civic participation, among other things.

For information on how to obtain the Directory of Chicago Ethnic Organizations, contact the Illinois Ethnic Coalition at 312-368-1155.