

City's immigrant influx is boon for translators

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Even though Russian runner Lidia Grigoryeva was the first woman to cross the finish line in this year's Indianapolis Life 500 Festival mini-marathon, the challenge wasn't over yet.

Grigoryeva still faced the hurdle of articulating her elation and relief to nearby reporters and the rolling television cameras.

That's when Hoosier businessman Bill Zart stepped out of the crowd to interpret 26-year-old Grigoryeva's native language.

Zart's Russian rescue--he's also fluent in German, Portuguese and French--represents the widening local language landscape in recent years.

In 2000, the Hoosier heartland is home to an ever-increasing number of international communities that span countries in Europe, Asia and South America.

The growth of these new populations has been driven by the global economy, in particular Indiana's strong manufacturing and corporate ties with foreign companies. But the surprising number of international pockets defies Indianapolis' reputation as a homogeneous Midwestern city.

And the multi-cultural explosion has simultaneously boosted the local translation and language-training businesses, with at least a dozen firms in practice and hundreds of free-lance interpreters and translators readily available around the state.

Zart kick-started Indy Translations LLC with business partner Kelly Hocker in 1997 to meet the growing linguistic demands.

Though they work with 20 languages, the pair admit Spanish is their biggest "client," a reflection of the city's largest immigrant population.

City figures indicate the Hispanic community has grown to between 90,000 and 100,000 people.

Indy Translations' services vary from day to day, said Zart and Hocker. One client may need them as interpreters at a hospital visit or at a deposition in court. The next day their employees might be knee-deep in translating intricate medical jargon for a pharmaceutical firm.

It's much the same way staff at another downtown translation firm operates, said Tamra Lewis, owner of Pangea Lingua Inc. Lewis said her firm's unexpected growth spurt assures her the language translation industry is yet to peak locally.

This year, Pangea more than doubled revenue and tripled staff. The 3-year-old firm turned \$1.4 million in sales compared to \$600,000 in 1999.

Industry analysts predict that, nationally, firms will earn \$20 billion a year from translation services within five years.

"We average 40 languages a year and, of course, the most popular language is Spanish," said Lewis, the only Americanborn among her seven employees.

Lewis added that 80 percent of her firm's work comes from the city's corporate and medical sectors and the remainder is a mix of national and international projects.

Theresa Kulczak, executive director of the JapanAmerica Society of Indiana Inc., said Hoosiers' interest in all things Japanese has skyrocketed over the decade.

"Several years ago, there were virtually no Japanese restaurants or grocery stores and now you can count at least 20 restaurants in the city. Even driving through Indiana's small towns you'll see sushi bars," said Kulczak, who attributes Indiana's manufacturing relationship with Japan as the fuel for the growth.

Japanese manufacturers began targeting Indiana for business and investment opportunities in the late 1980s. There are more than 200 manufacturing plants in Indiana with Japanese ties, triple the number a decade ago.

Kulczak relies on the local translation companies and free-lancers to help new Japanese families with language needs, while her organization concentrates on other gapbridging and nurturing issues.

"One great thing is, many of these translators and interpreters are Indiana students who have gone through Japanese programs in high schools, traveled to and lived in Japan, and returned with high fluency," she said.

This fall, JASI started distributing a 300-page Japanese language "Indiana Guide Book," compiled over the last three years by Hoosier-dwelling Japanese.

Aimed at helping fellow Japanese families ease their way into local life, the comprehensive tome contains sophisticated details about the state and all it offers alongside simple hints on writing letters to excuse children from school.

The Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association also turns to the local industry to handle translation services for international conventions like the annual Performing Racing Industry trade show conducted last week.

The ICVA helped establish an international lounge on the show floor to deal with an estimated 30,000 guests from 25 countries, said ICVA spokeswoman Melissa Mann.

The lounge was staffed with bi- and trilingual interpreters from local and out-of-state companies. They helped the visitors talk to vendors and negotiate deals, contracts and other documentation.

The local translation industry advises companies or individuals seeking translators and interpreters to pick carefully.

"Choosing a translator is key," said Martin George, director of Language Training Center Inc. "People should be formally trained in translation and or interpreting as it's crucial for switching back and forth between different linguistic systems.

"Lots of people can hang out a shingle," he added, "Fry to find translators who can show you previous work such as written pieces, especially those [companies] that need technical language translations."

Always ask for references, said Walter Bacak, executive director of the American Translators Association in Virginia, because language translation errors can occur easily and often.

"I tell people it's like shopping for any other consultant: Check references," Bacak said.

Pangea Lingua's Lewis believes the search goes beyond literal translations.

"Look for those who understand the need to include cultural nuances:" she said. "We believe you can't separate the culture from the language."

Lewis referred to the popular "Got Milk?" advertising campaign that recently moved into Mexico. It featured a billboard of Latin crooner Julio Iglesias.

"The 'Got Milk?' translation turned out to be, 'Are you lactating?'" she said.

"You can't just do cursory explanations. You need to know the intent and meaning of the language."

Mandarin Chinese-speaking George applauds Indianapolis' current linguistic efforts, but urges the city to concentrate on immediate-need language zones such as courts, hospitals, real estate and the much-maligned license branches.

Lewis expects these wrinkles to be ironed out as demand for translation and interpreting services continues its rise.

"Even manufacturers of products that have been sold domestically for 20 or 30 years are starting to realize the need to be more global," she said. "And with that the need to look into having their product marketed in different languages."