

IVC lives by its motto of making friends, contacts, peace

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It's a typical morning at the International Visitors Council. The phones at the nonprofit's Center City office are ringing off the hook, e-mails are pouring in from all over the world, staffers are prepping for a big promotional event, and there is a delegation of Iraqis waiting to see IVC President and CEO Nancy Gilboy.

For Gilboy it's all in a day's work to bring international attention — and business and jobs along with it — to Philadelphia.

The IVC launched in 1954 as an extension of the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program, which exposes aspiring foreign leaders and businesses to the American way of life.

IVC of Philadelphia is one of some 90 councils nationwide tasked with orchestrating visitors programs that best reflect American culture and traditions. Its many initiatives depend on a mix of funds from the city, State Department and private grants — plus a healthy dose of individual philanthropy.

Gilboy's chapter administers a number of programs in keeping with its motto: "Make friends, make contacts, make peace."

The Discover Philadelphia program, for instance, aims to keep international students who graduate from local col-



CURT HUDSON

Nancy Gilboy of the International Visitors Council with some of the items visitors have brought her from their countries of origin.

leges and universities engaged with city business and community activities.

Events like First Wednesdays and IVC's 22-year barbecue tradition allow members to mingle with local VIPs.

IVC also administers a sister cities program that links Philadelphia with seven foreign cities in nine countries.

In the last five months of 2006 alone, IVC members met with about 1,300 visitors from more than 134 countries. Funding to sustain the organization's outreach initiatives has grown from a little more than \$250,000 in 1990 to more than \$1.2 million last year.

But arguably, what IVC does and has accomplished goes far beyond numbers.

"Ours is a very unique service," Gilboy said. "Because in addition to suggesting places to go and things to do, along with recommending restaurants and lodging facilities, we frequently interact on an extremely personal level."

IVC often finds itself in the role of welcoming committee for visitors and would-be residents, linking them to real estate agents, schools, shopping centers, doctors, and "to any information that will help showcase the many benefits our region has to offer," said Gilboy.

One convert is Tim Kleczka, senior vice president of operations for Anaheim, Calif.-based New Horizons Worldwide Inc. Kleczka, who oversees operations from the Netherlands for the \$365 million company that franchises some 300 computer training centers worldwide, will open an office in the Philadelphia region next month.

Kleczka said the decision to set up shop in Philadelphia was largely IVC's doing.

"Nancy and her staff are masters at immediately recognizing both business and personal needs," Kleczka said. "Over

the course of several trips to the Philadelphia area, it was she that matched us with various people within the IVC network who could best answer our many questions and address our concerns."

Thanks to an IVC network contact, Kleczka's daughter Kayla will be enrolling in the prestigious Baldwin School in Bryn Mawr in the fall.

Korean dental implant manufacturer Osstem Inc. was looking at sites around Pennsylvania when Managing Director of U.S. Operations Seung Woo Song connected with the IVC through Pennsylvania's Center for Direct Investment, another local organization dedicated to bringing investment to the area from overseas.

"We had initially considered the Scranton or Reading areas as potential sites for facilities," Song said. "Ultimately, it was a combination of information shared with us about the Philadelphia region's resources through IVC, plus the ongoing support and friendship of Nancy, that made our decision easy."

Osstem, a \$120 million publicly traded concern with sales office locations in New York and Los Angeles, expects to invest an estimated \$70 million to rehabilitate an existing building and construct a new 140,000-square-foot facility over the next couple of years on a 28-acre site formerly owned by U.S. Steel in Bucks County. The company will employ

IVC: Works to make Phila. more than just a dot on the map to visiting foreign groups

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more than 600 people.

Getting foreign investors to pump dollars and jobs into Philadelphia isn't easy, and it comes down to intercultural understanding, said Ron Henry, an attorney by trade who has also hosted numerous dignitaries as former IVC board chairman.

"I can't tell you the number of times I run into misconceptions visitors have about us and vice versa," said Henry,

who also serves as a consultant to the Pennsylvania state government.

A visit of delegates from Iraq a year or so made a deep impression on him.

"What we know and understand about other countries comes from the coverage that we are aware of," he said. "Meeting these people from different sects one on one who are all literally putting their lives on the line every day to make their form of government work, puts a human face on the political side of the equation."

In the big picture, getting a group of foreign nationals to see Philadelphia firsthand makes the city more than just a dot on the map between New York and Washington.

IVC Philadelphia's Harrisburg connection is Jeanne Schmedlin, director of special projects and chief of protocol within the office of the speaker of the house. Schmedlin coordinates as many as 20 delegation visits a year through IVC's senior program officer, Ron D'Alonzo.

She says dignitaries typically want to learn about the inner workings of American government, but sometimes there are other agendas.

"Just a few weeks ago," Schmedlin recalled, "we arranged a visit for three physicians from Hong Kong who were in charge of their country's health department. We set them up with members of our Health and Human Services Committee and others in order to help them compare and contrast healthcare delivery systems."

Schmedlin said that delegations visiting Harrisburg are always amazed at the availability of legislators and their willingness to have one on one interaction, schedule permitting.

Since her leadership involvement in 1990, Nancy Gilboy and her staff of six have courted countless foreign visitors, hoping to earn their respect, gain their trust and make a convincing case for the region as a great place in which to do business.

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Visitors have responded with personal gifts, and over the years her office has filled up with keepsakes from all over the world, such as a miniature collection of hand-painted theater masks from Beijing and a beautiful inlaid mother-of-pearl jewelry box from South Korea. A missile fragment from a former Soviet Union armament site sits on her desk next to a black-and-white photograph of the Russian rocket

scientist who gave it to her.

In her hallway hang several large sign-in boards, on which hundreds, if not thousands of visitors have signed messages of gratitude and appreciation.

"People come into IVC for a variety of different reasons, whether it be for business contacts, an interest in other cultures or simply curiosity," said Henry. "The magic of the organization is that it leverages individual talents and areas of expertise in ways that benefit everyone."

Always with an eye on the future, Nancy Gilboy continues to network and partner with key people who share her vision of making Philadelphia tops on the most friendly city to visit.

She, along with vice president of tourism for the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau Fritz Smith, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp. and more than 20 other organizations, represent a committee considering multilingual signs and other ideas to help foreign visitors better navigate the city. ■■■■