

Oak Square YMCA-Allston-Brighton
Truly a facility that is open and accessible to all.
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BELOW IS THE UNCUT VERSION OF THE YMCA BOSTON GLOBE STORY,
FOLLOWED BY THE UNCUT VERSION OF THE MEMBER PROFILES

Y facts

Languages spoken by Allston-Brighton Y employees and its volunteer board: English, Arabic, Cantonese, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and basic sign language

Native countries of Y employees and volunteer staff: United States, Brazil, Colombia, France, Italy, Morocco, Russia, Switzerland

Main Story

By Steve Maas
Globe Correspondent

ALLSTON-BRIGHTON -- Shortly after Jack Fucci became executive director of the Allston-Brighton Y, he found himself embroiled in a tempest in a steam room.

In the tradition of their homeland, some Russian-born members were sweating it out in the nude. They would no more wear a bathing suit in the steam room than in the shower. Y rules, however, require a bathing suit, not for reasons of modesty—the sexes are separated—but of hygiene.

Fucci tried explaining that to the Russians. Using an Internet translation program, he posted the policy in Russian in the locker room. Within hours after the notice went up, the front desk was besieged by, well, steamed-up bathers. Apparently, something got lost in translation.

Fortunately, a Russian-speaking staff member quickly saved the day, and Fucci can laugh about the mix-up today. It was just one of the challenges that go with running a YMCA that really ought to be spelled with the letters U and N.

Drop by and you might hear Russian in the locker room, Chinese in the hallways, Portuguese in the weight room, Spanish in the fitness center, and Italian in the Jacuzzi. Members stick pins in their home country on a map recently posted in the foyer. Some 45 nations have already been pinned.

What's amazing is that everyone seems to get along. But then I'm a member and perhaps a bit biased. I first belonged to the branch in the early '90s, when it was located in a

cramped, uninviting building about half a mile away. I rejoined a couple of years ago after it had moved into expansive new quarters in Oak Square. I was struck by how diverse its membership had become: people who had started their lives many thousands of miles apart were now huffing and puffing side by side in this unassuming Boston neighborhood.

“It’s a welcoming place,” says Donna Sullivan, the associate executive director of the branch. “Everyone is different, but all have a common interest in living a healthy life.”

Sullivan points to the summer camp program, which she oversees. “You see kids of all nationalities holding hands,” she says. “Kids don’t see the differences; they see the likenesses in each other.” And so too do the adults, according to the more than a dozen members and staff workers I interviewed.

The Y doesn’t keep statistics on its membership’s nationalities. Nearly one in three of Allston-Brighton residents was foreign born, according to the 2000 census. The 1980 census shows whites accounting for 86 percent of the neighborhood, compared with 69 percent in 2000. The percentage of Asians increased over that 20-year span from 6 percent to 14 percent, and of Hispanics from 5 percent to 9 percent.

Rosie Hanlon, 48, grew up in Brighton and now runs Brighton Main Streets, a nonprofit that promotes revitalization. The daughter of Irish immigrants, Hanlon says when she was a child the dominant ethnic groups were Irish, Italian, and Greek. “It was basically very white,” she says. “Now, it’s so diverse. We have business owners from Africa, Ireland, Greece, Hungary, Pakistan, Russia, and Italy.”

Main Streets played a leading role in raising money for the new Y building. “The Y is the key to the community, an important pulse of the community,” says Hanlon, whose children attend the teen center, where they’ve befriended Brazilians, Latinos, Irish, and Iranians.

The new building, which opened in 2001, offers three times the space as the old one and such new facilities as a gym and a dedicated child-care center. It has 6,500 members, which is twice that of the old building.

Like Hanlon, Piero Melia grew up in Brighton—just a few blocks from Oak Square. His family came over from Italy when he was 5 in 1968, and he joined the Y a few years later. “It kept me off the streets and out of trouble,” Melia says. He started noticing the demographics change in ’80s with an influx of Vietnamese and others from the Far East.

“I seem to have a way with people, a way of being able to interact with people of different cultures, all walks of life,” says Melia, who speaks Italian and Spanish and—like his colleagues at the Y—has become adept at using pantomime to demonstrate exercise routines. The teaching goes both ways. Melia says one Russian man showed him a better way to do pushups.

“I have a soft spot for non-native English speakers,” says the branch’s development manager, Tali Rausch, whose family came to America from France when she was 6.

The Y encourages employees to be pro-active, Rausch says “It’s not like you can provide training for all the different scenarios. It’s about treating people with respect. ... It’s a lot of smiling.”

Rausch says “99.9 percent of the time” things work out well, but with 800 members visiting daily—the branch is the busiest in Greater Boston—problems inevitably arise. When “something is consistently an issue, it’s time for a policy,” she says. Otherwise, “you address it at that moment.”

She recalled at the old Y having to discourage a small group of Russian seniors from practicing one of their winter traditions. After a dip in the pool, they liked to open the exterior door in the pool area for a walk outside and then plunge into the Jacuzzi.

Irina Wertheim, who works the front desk at the YMCA part-time, immigrated to America in 2000 from Russia when she was 19. Wertheim says she is often asked to translate when Russians ask about membership or to intercede if a member, say, doesn’t understand how the lane policy works in the pool.

Wertheim says she also has had to coach some Russians on courtesy. When she first came to America, Wertheim was taken aback by how “nice” people were. “I didn’t understand why they were all smiling,” she says.

Fitness instructor Bill Gaffney says on occasion he has had to step in when a member loses patience while waiting for an exercise machine. “I think where a lot of the Russians came from they had to be very aggressive, a tactic they had to learn to survive,” he says. “You try to explain to them you don’t have to do that here.”

Overall, though, he finds it easier working with immigrants. “I think people from other countries will take suggestions a lot quicker than Americans,” he says.

Gaffney, a retiree who works part time, grew up in Boston of Irish descent. His wife is from Costa Rica, and he speaks some Spanish. “I want people to get a feeling they’re welcome here, that they’re not a number, but a person,” he says.

Some people are less receptive than others. Gaffney recalls a woman interrupting him as he was training someone on the Nautilus. It happened to be shortly before Christmas. “She started telling me all the things I’m doing wrong. Finally, I looked at her and said, ‘I hope you have a wonderful Christmas.’ Oh, she was waiting for an argument. I could see the veins popping out.”

Where was she from?

“New York.”

MINI PROFILES for Y story

Russia: Bella Farber

Three mornings a weeks, Bella Farber rises before the sun to catch the 66 bus near her Coolidge Corner home at 5:42 a.m., then transfers to the 57 bus and arrives at Oak Square YMCA at 6:15 for her 2 ½-hour exercise regimen.

The daughter of a railroad worker, Farber pays attention to timetables. “Trains don’t wait for passengers,” her father would remind her and her sister. “Passengers wait for the train. We were never late.”

Her father’s job saved the family. Farber was born in 1934 in a Romanian town that fell under Soviet control through a 1940 USSR-German pact. A year later, as German bombs fell around her apartment house, Farber’s family fled east on the last Soviet freight train out of town. “My mother hugged me,” she recalls. “As long as I had my mom and my pa, I really didn’t care.”

Some 35 years later, it was Farber’s turn to be a mother shepherding a family to safety. In 1975, she, her husband, and two sons moved to America to escape Soviet persecution of Jews. An aid group placed them in Kansas City. Farber, who had taught Russian language and literature in high school, supported the family by washing test tubes in a hospital lab by day and dishes at a restaurant by night. Her husband, a surgeon, worked on preparing for American medical exams.

When the family moved to Boston a few years later—owning lots of books but not even a bed—she worked at a nursing home. “You come to America, you start from nothing,” she says.

Farber learned English on her own. “I studied reading my sons’ books, Hardy Boy books, Nancy Drew books,” she says, adding that she also devoured English versions of books she had read in Russian. After completing an actuarial program, Farber landed a job in the pension department at Coopers & Lybrand.

One of Farber’s sons is a computer programmer, the other is chief of vascular surgery at Boston Medical Center. Her husband, who died five years ago, never did pass the medical exams. “He lost his life here,” Farber says of his career. “The boys won their lives here.”

She started going to the Y six years ago on her doctor’s advice after she had undergone operations on her arthritic knees. Now she begins her Y routine on a stationary bike, moves on to other equipment, and finishes up in the pool with a class for arthritis

sufferers. At 8:45, she boards the bus for her trip back to Brookline. “Then I can do my crossword puzzles and read without feeling guilty,” she says.

Peru: Gloria and Raoul Condemarin

With their real families a continent away in Peru, Gloria and Raoul Condemarin have found a new one at the Allston-Brighton Y.

“You feel welcome here,” Gloria Condemarin says. “We’ve loved it from the very beginning.

Both psychiatrists, the Condemarins have created a social life through their 10-year-old son, Martin. Like them, many of the families have just one child, with the Y providing surrogate brothers and sisters. Their friends include Chinese, Russians, Germans, Colombians, and Americans. That makes for interesting fare at the suppers before swim meets, where the pasta ranges from Chinese to Latino.

The Condemarins each came from large, working-class families in Lima. Raoul’s father, who died when he was a young boy, was a bricklayer, Gloria’s dad was a taxi driver and her mother ran a grocery store. The couple met in medical school, where they were in the same class. It was a select group: 5,000 applications for each slot.

After receiving their degrees, they worked in AIDS and cholera research. They spent five years in a remote village clinic, where they would see 100 patients a day. They lived in a shanty town among their patients in a home without running water. “If I want to teach you something, I have to live like you,” Raoul says.

The couple came to America for more specialized study, eventually moving to Brighton because of a close friend. Gloria, 40, focused on child psychiatry; Raoul, 42 studied addiction, psychoanalysis, and psychosomatic diseases.

Do they turn their psychiatric know-how on each other when they get in a family argument? “We know each other so well, we can’t go there,” says Gloria.

Italy: Onelia Marini

You might say that Pasquale Marini left his heart in San Donato.

Marini immigrated from an Italian mountain village in 1947 when he was 17. When he returned to Italy as a US Marine, he was determined to look up the girl who had brushed off his advances years before.

“He came with the uniform. He was skinny and tall,” recalls Onelia Marini. And she was finally won over.

On a recent Wednesday morning, I met the Marinis outside the Y pool, where Onelia had just finished her class for arthritis sufferers.

Born in 1930—her father a charcoal maker and her mother a baker—she recalls spending her early teens sleeping in the basement as World War II encroached on her village. “We couldn’t even go out after dark because the soldiers were there. It was bad,” she says, recalling bomb fragments setting roofs ablaze.

A decade later she was married and living in Newton. The couple moved to Brighton in 1962. Her husband worked as a carpenter and she at a local school and a nursing home. They raised two sons, one an accountant and the other a veterinarian.

Marini inherited her mother’s talent for baking, preparing such treats as tiramisu, coffeecake, and a sponge cake filled with chocolate and vanilla. She regrets that she didn’t “go to school to learn English the right way.” Not that she has any trouble communicating with her five grandchildren. “They like my cooking.”

South Korea: Okja Choi

Okja Choi says when she moved to America, she not only traveled halfway across the world but jumped a generation in time. “I moved up 50 years. I was living your mom’s generation,” says Choi of the male-dominated Korea she left in 1999.

Choi, an early morning regular in the lap pool at the Y, was born in 1970 in Seoul, where her father had a wholesale vegetable business and the family of five lived in a two-bedroom house. After graduating college with a computing major, she faced a grim job market; Korea was in the midst of a financial meltdown, much as America is today.

After studying English in London, she moved on her own to Boston eight years ago. “I felt like I’m just like a baby, learning everything,” she says. Early on, she joined a downtown branch of the Y, where she fell off a treadmill and bashed up her legs. “I was totally just embarrassed and didn’t know what to do... I couldn’t even go to CVS.”

Her first job was taking reservations at a car rental agency; today, she is branch manager of United Commercial Bank in Allston. Her Korean friends tell her, “You’re very different. You’re very confident.” In Korea, she says, it would be viewed as “snobbish” for a woman to display such confidence. “I’d have to live my life not only for me, but for the family. That’s more important than who you are.”

Choi sees Koreans in Allston-Brighton as being too insular, dining mainly at Korean restaurants, shopping at Korean stores. She is trying to persuade them to get more involved with the community at large. As to herself: “I’m hoping to take the good parts of each culture to make me a better person.”