

Martin F. Manna - Advocate expands the influence of the Chaldean community

Detroit News, The (MI) - Sunday, May 29, 2005

Author: The Detroit News ; Nick Bunkley

Chaldeans own thousands of stores and other businesses in Metro Detroit, but for decades they remained largely invisible.

That's because Chaldeans - Catholics of Iraqi descent - have always been much better entrepreneurs than publicists, said Martin Manna, who grew up hustling every day after school to work in his family's party store in Detroit. "We didn't do a good job of promoting ourselves. We didn't even know what to tell people."

Manna made sure that changed when he quit his job as a financial adviser to start an advertising and public relations firm in 2001. His company, Interlink Media in Farmington Hills, has drawn much attention to southeast Michigan's estimated 120,000 Chaldeans, the largest concentration outside the Middle East.

Manna has essentially become a one-man community clearinghouse, the first stop for help with everything from fund-raising to immigration snags.

"It's so honorable that people think of us and allow us to advocate for the community," he said.

When Manna talks about "us," he's usually referring to his staff at Interlink, including his wife, Tamara. But others give more credit to Manna than he accepts on his own.

"He is not about 'I'; he's about 'we,'" said Adhid "Ed" Miri, president of the Chaldean Iraqi-American Association. "He really has been a great ambassador for our causes, whether they are social, cultural, professional or media. Really, he's in the trenches."

Chief among those causes is the Chaldean-American Chamber of Commerce, which Manna co-founded a little more than a year ago. In that brief time, the chamber has attracted more than 400 members, and its expanding influence was evident when Gov. Jennifer Granholm spoke at its annual dinner in April.

"They have grown about as fast as I have seen a nonprofit organization grow," said Michael Sarafa, president of the Associated Food Dealers of Michigan. "He's really coalesced the Chaldean business community around this organization. It's going to be a real force."

Chaldeans own about 6,000 Metro Detroit businesses, from convenience stores, service stations and hotels to doctors' and lawyers' offices.

As the Chaldean chamber's executive director, Manna faces unique challenges in helping those businesses prosper.

He's worked to protect Chaldean store owners' rights during aggressive inspections by Detroit police. Chaldeans own 90 percent of the city's 600 party stores.

And many Chaldean entrepreneurs have been victims of violence. Since the 1960s, about 200 have been killed at their businesses, Manna said, including **Waad Murad**, a Detroit auto dealer and founding member of the chamber gunned down in March. The chamber has offered a reward in the hopes of catching **Murad**'s killers.

Manna has also been instrumental in the creation of the Chaldean Cultural Center in West Bloomfield Township, scheduled to open next year as the first of its kind in the nation.

As spokesman for the project, Manna is charged with drawing attention to a \$5.5 million fund-raising campaign, which has passed 80 percent of its goal. His efforts resulted in a \$200,000 federal grant for the center, the first time Congress has ever given money to a Chaldean cause. "In Washington, they know what a Chaldean is now," Manna said, "and that's historic."

Manna, who lives in Bloomfield Hills and has two young children, was born in Detroit five years after his family fled Iraq with money hidden in the youngest child's diapers. He has a master's degree in business administration and a corporate finance degree, both from Wayne State University.

Last year, Manna established the Chaldean News, a monthly newsmagazine that reaches about 10,000 homes. It's been so well received that he went to Chicago last month to help start a similar publication aimed at that city's Assyrian population.

"Martin is an achiever," Miri said. "He's not just a wonderful starter, but he's an excellent finisher. When he starts something, he sees it through."

Age: 33."

Residence: Bloomfield Hills."

Occupation: Managing partner, "

Interlink Media."

Why honored: For co-founding "and serving as executive director "of the Chaldean Chamber of "Commerce and advocating for Metro "Detroit's large Chaldean community."

Section: Special

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Company Name: #keywords2#

Index Terms: MICHIGAN ; AWARDS ; POSITIVE ; ETHNIC GROUPS ; OFFICIALS

Record Number: det19420361

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