

News-Star



What's going on in here?

ICA Center is home to busy non-profits at work in Uptown

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Uptown building shelters international 'family'

ICA Center works on all eight levels

By **TODD SAVAGE**
Staff Writer

A couple of years ago a stranger asked Rita Simo if she could use a piano at the People's Music School. The young woman, a Russian immigrant, was taking English classes at the Hilliard Adult Education Center, located one floor below the free music academy.

Simo obliged and led the woman to a practice room. Later, Simo heard the woman playing quite masterfully and opened the door to see for herself. She found the woman crying — tears of joy — as she played.

"That made me feel good to have something to give," says Simo, the school's founder and director.

Like neighbors in need of a cup of sugar, Simo and staff at other non-profit agencies located in a unique Uptown high-rise community have learned that they can count on each other when they come up short.

Non-profits started working side-by-side in 1986 when the Ecumenical Institute, a non-profit grass roots development organization with offices in Chicago (known as the Institute for Cultural Affairs worldwide), opened the doors of its 166,000-square-foot building at 4750 N. Sheridan Road to social service organizations.

The music school was the first tenant. The latest, the Tibetan Resettlement Project, a new group that assists Tibetan refugees, moved in early this month, bringing occupancy to 90 percent with 14 tenants.

The Institute took over the building for \$1 from the Kemper Insurance Co. in 1971 when Kemper moved to the suburbs. The Institute used the building as its international headquarters for 15 years, but eventually decentralized operations and moved much of its staff overseas — freeing up lots of space.

Today, the ICA Community Resource Center, as it is called, is a veritable mini-United Nations. Reflecting the cultural diversity of Uptown, it's a bustling place where you're likely to hear many tongues spoken.

"I'm sure there are 72 languages and nationalities in this building," says Mary Laura Bushman, who helps manage the building as development director. But that's not a problem, she says, because "any day you can get a translator."

On a given afternoon, Korean senior citizens are tutored in English, public aid re-



Photos by John McClelland

Joon Kon Pahn teaches English to Korean-Americans in just one of dozens of cultural programs conducted at the ICA Center in Uptown.

ipients are informed about eligibility requirements, church groups bunk down in the building's conference center, and recent Laotian arrivals get help finding a place to live.

"It's almost like a little village," Simo says.

Among the village's neighbors are Christopher House, a Head Start preschool and after school program; the North Side district office of the city Department of Human Services; the Ethiopian Community Association; Chicago Health Outreach, a family health clinic; and Hilliard's 14 classrooms.

There's the Lao Service Center; Travelers & Immigrants Aid Refugee Services; the Korean American Senior Center; Episcopal Migration Ministries; a program for mentally handicapped adults, and a dormi-

tory for homeless youths. An International Conference Center provides modest dormitory-style rooms, meeting rooms and a kitchen to visiting church and non-profit groups. Institute staff members live on the seventh and eighth floors.

"Someone called it a one-stop mission center," says Bushman, who has worked for the Institute since 1971, including a five-year stint in the South Pacific. "If it's not here, someone knows where it is."

The building, which is architecturally remarkable for its polished stone facade, contains small surprises, like the old paneled Kemper board room on the seventh floor, which the Institute uses for its own board meetings and other special events.

Since 1988, the Institute has made major improvements to the building — the first four floors of which date back to 1961.

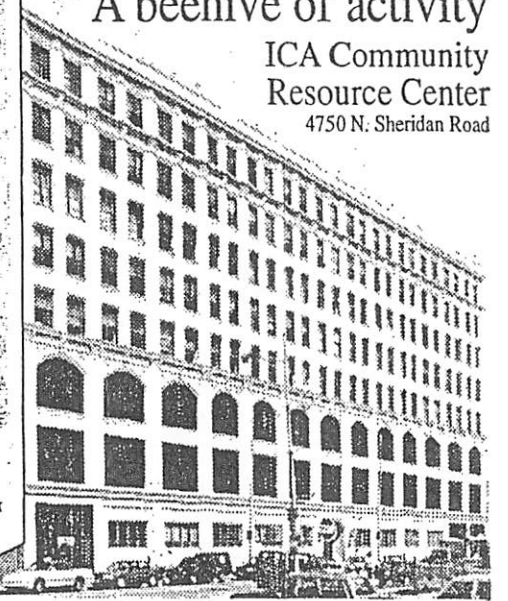
ICA Center—Who's where

- 8, 7 ICA staff residences
- 6 Residential community space
Conference center
- 5 Neon Street dorms
Chicago Health Outreach
Independent living
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Conference center
Episcopal Migration Ministry
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Laos Community Center
Peoples Music School
- 2 Ethiopian Center
Hilliard Adult Education
Program Center
Chicago Health Family Clinic
- 1 Christopher House Head Start
Department of Human Services
International Conference Center
ICA Building Services
Training Program

A beehive of activity

ICA Community Resource Center

4750 N. Sheridan Road



Source: ICA Community Resource Center

Lerner news graphic/Matthryn K. McClelland

placing the hand-operated elevators with electric ones, installing new air conditioning and electricity, and putting in new windows.

The center appeals to many agencies because it offers a safe, secure building and is in a neighborhood where many clients live. It also means working next door or upstairs from colleagues. For example, many of the community's refugee agencies are clustered in the building.

"We see problems from the same perspective," says Sue Kang, director of the Korean American Senior Center. "We learn from each other and we share with each other." Agencies exchange advice on which kind of photocopying machine to buy, recommend good accountants or lend their translation services.

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ple have the opportunity to interchange with each other in a non-threatening way," says Simo. "That might be one of the most important things this building has to offer."

For the tenants, leasing space from the Institute means having a landlord with a shared mission.

"They are aware that there's going to be a variety of people with a variety of English levels and a variety of needs that come through," says Virginia Koch, associate director of Travelers & Immigrants Aid Refugee Services.

For the Institute, the ICA Center was somewhat of an experiment. "We've done a lot of work internationally, and we realized that high-rise buildings could also be