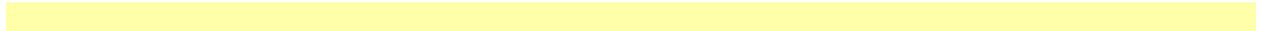


Chaldean Cultural Center and History Museum spans from Iraq to Detroit and beyond

By: [Sherri Kolade](#) | [West Bloomfield Beacon](#) | Published May 24, 2017

Mary Romaya, director of the Chaldean Cultural Center, stands inside one of the exhibits May 23 at the Chaldean Cultural Center and History Museum at the Shenandoah Country Club.

Photo by Donna Agusti



WEST BLOOMFIELD — Being persecuted for their religion didn't stop them.

Coming to a foreign land without knowing the language — and having little to no money — didn't deter them.

Educating others about who they are motivates them.

The expansive history of Chaldeans is what you will find inside the Shenandoah Country Club, 5600 Walnut Lake Road, at the Chaldean Cultural Center and History Museum, which opened May 2.

The concept of the museum began in 2003, but construction only occurred in the last four or five years.

The five-gallery, interactive museum is dedicated to showing others who Chaldeans are, and how many of them migrated from Iraq to Detroit, Warren, Sterling Heights and Shelby Township, among other areas.

Mary Romaya, executive director of the Chaldean Cultural Center in West Bloomfield, spoke May 23 at the museum about how the Iraqi Christian minority group has also lived in villages in the Nineveh Plains, among other places. She discussed how they have experienced violence from extremist groups, who have attacked other Christian minority groups throughout the Middle East.

“We want people to know that we're persevering. We're still around and plan to be around another 5,000 years,” she said.

Romaya said that in each gallery, the flooring is marked with a time period stamp and represents a specific period. From the wood-planked floors of the 1930s — representing Chaldean-owned grocery stores — to the Jerusalem stone tiles found in 330 B.C. — placed at the entrance of the museum — attendees will be taken back in time.

Light blue drapery represents the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and framed pictures of people young and old represent the past and the future.

Romaya said that when people tour the museum, a lot of them tell her that they didn't realize "we went so far back in history."

Some people are surprised to find out that Chaldeans are Catholic, she said.

"I think that some people think because we come from Iraq, we're Muslim. ... But ... we belong to the Chaldean Rite of the Catholic Church. We're fully united with Rome."

Chaldeans have lived in Detroit for over a century now, beginning the migration process around the 1900s.

"By 1910, there was the beginnings of a community in Detroit," Romaya said, adding that many Chaldeans settled along Jefferson Avenue in Detroit.

Romaya said her father came to the U.S. in 1929, and her family lived near Henry Ford Hospital.

"I remember as a small child going to the Fisher Theatre when it was a movie house, before it was for plays," she said.

Romaya said there were three main reasons for Chaldeans to come to Detroit: jobs, the comfort in knowing that other Middle Eastern cultures lived in the city, and the proximity to family.

She said the Ford Motor Co. would advertise job opportunities on Ellis Island, in New York; many immigrants were young men.

"If they came to Detroit, they (knew they) would survive," she said, adding that immigrants could expect to make \$5 per day in Detroit's factories.

Some Chaldeans chose Detroit to be near immigrants from Lebanon and Syria, who speak Arabic.

While Chaldeans speak Arabic — the national language of Iraq — their native language is Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew.

"They could communicate with them. The Syrians owned grocery stores, so Chaldeans worked for Syrian grocers in Detroit and learned the grocery business," Romaya said, adding that Chaldeans began opening up their own stores when they had earned enough.

Chaldean immigrants unable to move to America — because of faulty paperwork or other reasons — moved to Canada.

By the late 1920s, the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel and the Ambassador Bridge made it possible for relatives to visit each other, Romaya said.

Romaya said the museum is one of a kind — other museums may include pieces of Chaldean history, but not to this depth, she said.

“There are a lot of layers of information ... and we wanted it to be sophisticated,” Romaya said.

Vanessa Denha Garmo, founder of Livonia-based Denha Media Group, appears in a 20-minute video as part of the Chaldeans Today gallery at the museum, discussing how she grew up with immigrant parents.

“I talked about really my childhood, being first-generation (American),” Garmo said during a phone interview. “I realized as I was getting older, not only were my parents and I generations apart, we were kind of worlds apart. The world in Iraq is so different from America.”

She said her father would tell her about gratitude when he saw her fighting with her older sister over not being able to drive her car.

“My dad was listening to us argue, and he said, ‘You girls are so unappreciative. When I was your age, (my brother and I) had to share ... our donkey.’”

Garmo said she is impressed with how Chaldean families have adapted so well to American culture and have made a living with their entrepreneurial spirit.

“And (how Chaldeans are) working really hard to give our children a better life, and I think the museum tells that story,” she said.

Museum admission costs \$5 per person and \$15 per family.

For more information, go to www.chaldeanculturalcenter.org/exhibits.